THE
PRINCE'S
UPRISING
A Twisted Wonderland Fanzine
bunnwich

To Those who Chase the Sunlight

Hello! Thank you so much for your interest in and picking up the second volume of *The Prince's Uprising*! This is the result of the hard work and support of many, many people (almost 40!) over several months, and we're excited to see how the Savanaclaw stans would like this, especially since we're almost always in a Savanaclaw content drought haha (not actually haha TWST GIVE US OUR BOYS).

A huge thank you to every contributor who stuck with us to the very end! Despite many hitches and bumps in the path, your support means everything to us, and we hope to come back for a better and more spectacular volume 3- the last of the Uprising series. A thank you to the mods who kept this show running when I tried dealing with another zine and the subsequent burnout, and **you, the reader**, as well, for looking us over and thinking about giving this a shot.

A big thank you to Ren (@bunnwich on tumblr) and Van (@vauxxnm on tumblr) for drawing the front and back covers! They express what we were looking for in two dimensions perfectly, and Van's art allows us to bridge for a third volume in the most interesting way!

From us mods, thank you for giving us a chance, we sincerely hope you enjoy all 98 pages of fanfiction and art!!

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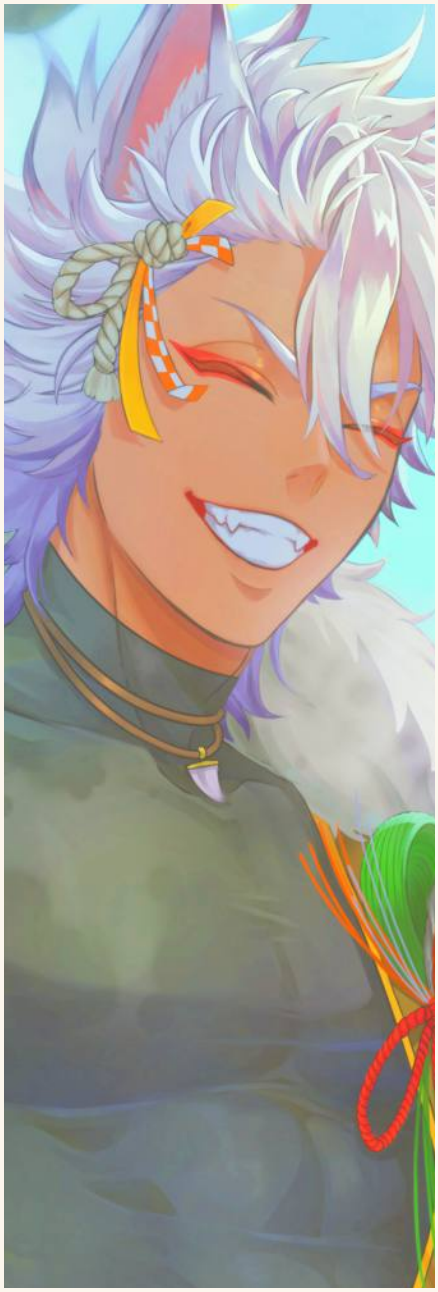

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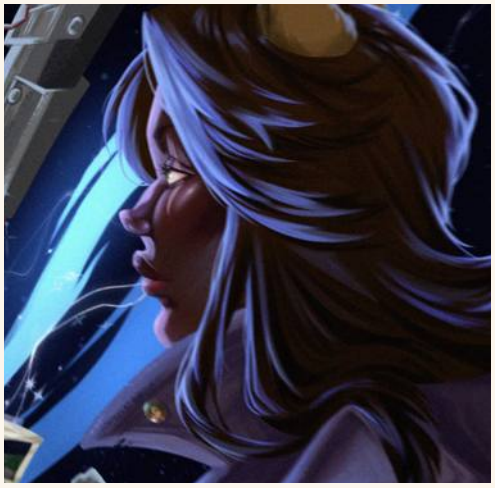

LEÓN

LOL, the lil' pupper's feeling too shy

y for a massage. - Ruggie

AS THE SUN BREAKS

QuillAffinity

A/N: An extended cut of this fic will be available at a later date post-release! Do look out for it :)

Dear ~~Unka~~ Uncle Leona,

I am humblee inviteting you to my birthfday partee nex weakend. There will be cake and cookiys and juc (dont worre Mama said you can hav aduolt juc tooo). Please come. I lov you and miss you and wann plae wit you.

~~Since Froo~~ From,
Me (its me!!! Cheka)

Cheka didn't usually like his birthdays.

Everyone always watched him and smiled at him and told him to do things like smile and thank people he didn't know. But at least Mama and Abbu and sometimes Baba would come and eat cake with him. That part he liked. Mama said that Uncle Leona used to come to his birthdays, but because he was busy with school, he couldn't come to all his new ones. But this year, he and his Abbu sent Uncle a letter!

So he had to come now!

Cheka hummed to himself, planning out all the fun games he would play with his uncle while enjoying a snack with his grandfather in his room. The young lion was very happy that his Abbu was feeling better nowadays, but Cheka still couldn't play with him very often. And when they did play, the young prince always had to remember that his grandfather was very, very, very, very old and he couldn't play horsey with him.

"I see someone's very excited for his birthday..." Abbu huffed with laughter. Before, his voice used to scare Cheka because it was so raspy and quiet, but now he was used to it. And he knew his Abbu loved him very, very much. The small cub smiled up at the old lion, half a tea biscuit in crumbs scattered across his munching cheeks.

“Umhmm! Unca’s coming and everything! And, and I made Kifaji promise not to be mean to him anymore.” Cheka puffed out his chest at that, more than proud of himself for the feat. His Abbu smiled at that, slightly yellowed fangs glinting in the sunlight.

King Nia of the fifth house of Kingscholar reached out a wrinkled hand to pat his sweet grandchild’s head. He had hair colored like his wife’s, Nia noted with an overflow of affection. The old King’s bloodline couldn’t have produced a cub this sweet, of that he was positive. So Nia could only thank the Sun and Stars that his Falena married dear Sadiki. She’s a good woman, a strong one that Tumani would’ve loved dearly.

Cheka rumbled happily at the headpat. He was glad Abbu was just as happy to see Uncle Leona as he was. When he had come to visit a couple months ago, the little prince had heard Abbu and Uncle Leona had argued. And that his Baba was very upset about it, too. But now…now everything should be ok. Right? Right.

Yeah!

Leona let out the longest, most suffering-filled sigh of his entire life.

Not because he was back in Afterglow Savannah. No. He’d never complain about coming back to the country he loved. Instead, the source of his misery was, as usual lately, his family. Granted, since the King called him home a few months ago, both he and Falena had been going easy on him. Part of him appreciated it, but most of him was unnerved by it. And now he was called home.

Again.

Did flunking an entire year at Night Raven college mean nothing? If Leona wanted to be home, he could’ve aced his remaining requirements with his eyes closed. But nooo, that little screechbox and that deadbeat father of a King had to start playing on his heart strings. Leona let out a smaller, slightly less aggrieved sigh in the air-conditioned backseat of one of the royal family’s cars.

With deft, Spelldrive-calloused fingers, he unfolded Cheka’s letter to him, and the older prince reread the soon-to-be six-year-old’s chicken scratch. Why every letter needed to be in a different color, Leona would never understand. Yet even he couldn’t deny the little curl of affection that twined around his heart at the effort his little nephew poured into his clumsy words.

Tabloids, nobles, and politicians alike always like to gossip that he was cruel and bitter towards the little twerp. But, truth be told, Leona never could bring himself to hate Cheka. Did the cub's birth truly and resolutely ruin any and all hope the Housewarden had of becoming king? Yes. Absolutely. Without a shred of doubt. But what was he supposed to do?

Toss an actual, literal baby off a cliff?

"Uh…Sir? No, uh, Your Highness? We're here?" Leona arched a dark brow at the chauffeur's word vomit. Huh.

That was new.

Usually, palace workers only allowed him the barest portion of respect. Leona couldn't even remember the last time one of them had bothered to address him with his proper title. Which could only mean one thing.

Someone demanded it so.

The question was, who was it? Leona tossed Falena off that cliff, out of that window of opportunity almost immediately. With Kifaji following the plummet shortly after. No way in hell either of them would ever speak in his favor.

His father?

Granted, that old man seemed honest about making amends, but he'd been off the throne for so long that his orders must have gotten downright unpalatable with all the grains of salt they carried. Nevermind the fact that Leona still didn't see that prideful old lion as the type to renege on the treatment he had all but approved of for so long.

Maybe his sister-in-law?

Yeah. Yeah, that seemed like the most likely choice. She had always been good to him. At least as good as she could be without getting any of his political red tape all over her. Yeah, it had to be her. Otherwise, the only option left was Cheka. Which…as Heir Apparent…maybe?

Yeah, no.

“Thanks.” The second prince muttered as he opened the car door on his own, missing the flicker of surprise over the driver’s face.

To his further surprise, Kifaji wasn’t the one who greeted him at the entrance to the main palace. Rather, it was one of his assistants, a tall eagle beastwoman by the name of Oyoe. Leona dipped his head towards her in respect as she slightly bent her feathered, taloned arm over her chest and took up a short curtsey.

“Your Highness, welcome home. Your family will be delighted to have you in attendance for Prince Cheka’s birthday celebration.” Is that the new narrative they’re spreading nowadays? Despite his doubts about Oyoe’s statement, Leona simply nodded at her words and proceeded to follow her through one of the side passages, as the main passage through their palace was seldom ever used. Oyoe explained that they were on their way to one of his sister-in-law’s parlors for snacks and tea.

As Leona made his way through familiar halls of his childhood, he couldn’t help but reminisce on youthful instances in which he hid along these very same entryways in a game of hide and seek. Back then, he was unused to their games of three suddenly turning into two as his older brother was called away from something or other. He always threw a fit whenever it was his mother who found him. Weeping at the feeling of being abandoned by his so-called FaFa at the end of those little games.

His mother’s hands may have been roughened by a lifetime of hard work, but they were always gentle as they wiped his shining tears. Hugging him close enough that every gaspy little breath of his was laced with her soothing tangerine and clove scent. Telling Leona that, yes, his brother still loved him and that, no, he’d never abandon him…how shocked Queen Tumani would be to see them now, the second prince wondered.

Despite his schooled expression, Leona’s heart twinged as they transitioned to the Golden Plains palace where his sister-in-law and nephew lived. Where he and his brother used to live with their mother. It was a beautiful, peaceful structure made out of cool red clay and thick stone that kept them cool even in the height of summer, with walls painted with every sort of plant and animal that made its home in Sunset Savannah. A far cry from his own palace, but far more dear to him.

In his mother’s era there were wind chimes everywhere, gifts from her homeland that were decorated with seashells. The gardens were full of fruit trees of every sort, mostly his mother’s favorites. And weapons, some used by Tumani herself, decorated the walls, high out of her children’s reach, that told the proud history of her people and their military exploits. Now?

All those things were gone.

Probably locked away in some vault or another. But that's not to say his sister-in-law had terrible interior design. Not at all. The halls of Leona's childhood now had all manner of skillful embroidery and fluttering tapestry on display. The gardens had more flowerbeds than trees now. Not to mention the carved and painted masks that hung along the wall from all their country's provinces. Leona spared the new decor little more than a cursory glance before his ears perked, twisted, and the second prince stopped in his tracks. Oh.

Oh no.

"UNCA!!!!!!" Just before the little screechbox could launch himself towards the center of Leona's back, the older lion quickly turned to catch his rascal nephew by the back of his tunic shirt. Cheka blinked once, twice. Huh? Wasn't he supposed to be hugging Unca right now? He had made sure to pounce properly this time, wiggling his butt in the air like his friends told him too.

Cheka looked up, finding his Unca's green eyes boring into his brown ones. But the little cub simply gazed up at his Uncle and smiled, waving his suspended limbs. Home! Unca was finally home! Leona sighed, exhausted already, before setting the little cub down. At which point, Cheka immediately attached himself to his jean-covered leg.

"H-Hey! Get off of-"

"But I love you! And I missed you! Me and Abbu and Baba and Mama missed you so, so much Unca!!!"

Contrary to popular belief, Leona had a heart.

He hurt and bled like anyone else. And who could ever keep their heart still and cold when someone else admits their love for them? Once upon a long time ago, he had wanted a house, a family full of warm, honest declarations of love. And though those dreams died in that car accident that took his mother, Cheka's innocent little affirmations never failed to soften even the hardest parts of Leona's heart. The second prince could only sigh to hide the twist in his chest.

"Yeah, yeah."

Surprisingly, the birthday party was rather painless.

Part of that was due to the fact that Cheka's parents kept the celebration small in terms of annoying adults who would only pester Leona. Instead, there was a literal horde of children screeching, squawking, and screaming all over the gardens, far away from the second prince. And when it was all said and done, Cheka fell asleep in his favorite spot.

His Unca's lap.

He had plopped himself down on the spot after inhaling two whole slices of cake and smeared frosting all over the front of Leona's shirt. But he had looked so happy that the second prince hadn't the heart to punt the little tyke away from him. Leona sighed before picking up his nephew after everyone left, carefully supporting his back, and proceeded to walk back inside to keep his nephew out of the cool, savannah air.

"Mmf...Unca?" Shit.

"Just go back to sleep, I'll take you to your room." But Cheka never listened to him. Instead, the little Prince just dug his cub claws into Leona's shirt and rubbed his cheek against his neck.

"But when I wake up, Unca won't be there anymore..." A familiar strain of tears weighed down the childish squeak of his nephew's voice. Leona's chest ached at the sound.

Abandonment seemed to run in their family, however intentional or unintentional. And while Leona, despite everything, never wanted harm to come to his brother's family or his father, who's to say that they didn't want the same at some point? Harm still happened, despite both their efforts. The hollow feeling of abandonment still clung to these walls.

"That's right." Leona had no problem lying or obscuring the truth from people, but he wasn't so much of a scumbag as to lie to a child. Cheka's very existence meant the Housewarden could never be king. Thus, the two of them couldn't be too close, lest he drag his nephew down in the public eye with him. So distance, tinged with desertion, was the best thing he could offer Cheka with his meager power. The greatest advantage he could never utilize for himself.

Cheka looked up at his uncle. Looked up at the stern, gloomy face he knew so well. He knew that, one day, he'd be king, and the thought scared him like power always did. His uncle was strong, strong in a different way than Mama and Baba. How could he ever hope to be like them? To make sure everyone got along again?

"Then...Then I'll make sure that when you come back, you'll want to stay." He'll get stronger, he'll make their home better, kinder. Unca shouldn't be afraid of them then. Not now.

Not ever.

Leona could only hum at his nephew's quiet conviction. Maybe the little squirt wasn't too late to break this cycle of despair at the root of their family. It was too soon to tell, but the second Prince had faith in the little screechbox.

They were family, after all.

@Manjcan_art
@prettyormay

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@marjcan_art
@pritzormary

THE CULINARY DELIGHTS OF RAINDROP ROW

Fungi

This isn't how things were supposed to go.

Ruggie was SUPPOSED to dip on over to the slums for a day, maybe stay overnight at most, to help at the festival and then go back to school the next day like nothing had happened.

He did not, however, calculate a bunch of Nosy Nancys worming their way into his business.

And now here he is, lugging four and a half of his classmates through the Dark Mirror because they all *conveniently* had favors to pull from him.

'The best years of your life' Huh?

This hyena smells bullshit.

Thankfully, upon stepping out of the portal, Ruggie smells the familiar dusty smell of his hometown and instantly feels his mood lift.

"A-CHOO!"

And there it goes.

"Myeh...this place is dustier than Ramshackle..." Grim complains, exiting the portal after the hyena, as if he wasn't here by choice.

"Don't be rude, Grim." Yuu chides his companion as he exits the portal, "Ruggie's letting us tag along out of the kindness of his heart, so we should be respectful in turn."

'The kindness of his heart'? Yeah, sure. We'll call it that.

"Ah, but how could one feel anything short of pure awe at the rustic majesty of this place?" Rook says as he follows his classmates through the portal, holding out his arms to take in the atmosphere.

“Ok, let's not draw unnecessary attention to ourselves, guys.” Trey comments from behind Rook in line, “We're prime pickpocketing targets as is.”

Silver steps out of the portal as it closes, “Don’t worry. My father trained me to react quickly in situations like that.” He assures his upperclassman.

Ruggie claps his hands to get everyone’s attention, “Alright, new bloods, enough chit chat. Let’s get down to business.” He announces as they all turn to face him, “First, let me extend my humblest welcome to The Slums. As you’ve already guessed, keep your valuables close to ya at all times as there are more than a few thieves hangin’ around that are much less kind hearted than me.”

He waits for everyone’s acknowledgement before continuing.

“Second, before we can go to the festival, we need to go to my house to get the supplies for my street’s stall.” Ruggie explains as Grim tilts his head in confusion.

“Your street’s stall’? Why’s a whole street workin’ on just one stall?” The direbeast asks with his paw on his chin.

Ruggie lightly scoffs at the question, “You’re funny if ya think any one household around here has enough time, money and resources to run any kind of stall on its own. So, like I said, a bunch of houses on each street group up and run one together.”

“My, what a magnificent event! The spirit of community and cooperation is truly awe-inspiring!” Rook exclaims while clutching his chest in wonder, “To think such a thing has existed in my home country all this time!”

Silver blinks slowly as that last statement hits him, “Wait, YOU’RE from here too, Rook?” He asks, sounding as shell shocked as his mellow expression allows.

However, before Rook can respond, Ruggie quickly butts in, “O-KAY. We’re getting off-topic, so let’s just leave that disturbing revelation for some other time. The bottom line is that we’re going to my house first. Shake a leg, people, we’re losing daylight!” He orders, having no intention of acknowledging the fact that he and that freak of nature share the same home country.

The minutes go by as the hyena leads his merry band of misfits down various backstreets and the occasional alleyway until they come upon one of the smaller living spaces along the street.

After unlocking the door, Ruggie swings it open in a grand motion, “Welcome to my humble abode! I won’t stop you guys from touchin’ stuff, but just remember that if ya break it, ya bought it and I’m chargin’ extra for the older stuff.” He warns.

Yuu walks in and looks around the living room before looking as if he’s realized something, “Oh yeah, Ruggie, you mentioned that you live with your grandma, right? Is she home right now?” He asks as the others file in and spread out through the small space.

“Nope, she’s managin’ the stall this year, so she’s already out on the scene. No one makes donuts quite like her, after all.” Ruggie responds as he walks down the hall towards the closet.

“Your stall’s makin’ donuts?!” Grim exclaims, the growl of his stomach echoing down the hall.

“I wouldn’t get too excited, Grim.” Trey says from the direction of the kitchen, no doubt inspecting their setup as the hyena digs out several mid-to-large size boxes from the back of the closet, “Just because Ruggie let us tag along to repay our favors doesn’t mean it’s a free all-you-can-eat buffet at the festival.”

“Ya got that right!” Ruggie says as he walks back into the living room with the boxes from the closet stacked in his arms, “There’s no such thing as a free lunch, fellas! As long as I’ve got you guys here, I’m puttin’ ya to– Hey-HEY!!! Whaddaya think YOU’RE lookin’ at, buster?!” The hyena demands as he puts the boxes down on the couch next to a nodding-off Silver and marches over to Rook, who’s about to open a certain worn-down album from the bookshelf and snatches it out of his hands.

“OH! Pardonnez moi, Monsieur Dent-de-Lion!” Rook exclaims while raising his hands in surprise, “That album had caught my eye, so I was simply inspecting it!”

Ruggie huffs before shoving the album back onto the bookshelf, “ANYWAYS, like I was sayin’, as long as you guys’re here, I’m makin’ ya part of our stall’s staff!” He announces as he walks back over to the couch and opens a couple of the boxes, revealing several handmade uniforms, “Whether it’s managin’ sales, helpin’ with food prep, drawin’ attention to the stall or what have ya, if ya wanna be fully square with me, then put on a uniform and get out there!”

The others acknowledge the hyena’s proclamation mostly amicably, aside from a loud groan from Grim, and each take a uniform to change into.

“Do we REALLY have’ta do this?” Grim complains as he finishes putting on a child-size uniform, “Didn’t ya say that a buncha houses’re running the stall together?? Why d’ya need more workers???”

“Well, unfortunately for YOU, a majority of the people living in the houses on this street are either children or elderly, who can only do so much, which leaves us able-bodied young adults to pick up the slack!” Ruggie explains as he walks out of his changing room in full-uniform, earning another groan from the direbeast.

Before long, all five men and Grim have changed into their uniforms and are approaching the main event with a big box of extra cooking supplies in tow.

“Now gentlemen, I present to you the main attraction of The Slum’s Raindrop Festival: Welcome to Raindrop Row!” Ruggie exclaims as he opens his arms in a presenting fashion upon the group reaching the entrance of a LONG main street lined on either side with numerous food and craft stalls, each selling something different.

“You know, I’ve been meaning to ask: Why is it called the Raindrop Festival?” Yuu asks while looking around.

“Oh, it’s to celebrate the flourishing crops grown after the first rainfall from the Cloudcalling Festival, but we call it the “Raindrop” Festival ‘cause–” Ruggie begins to explain before a new voice from behind him cuts him off.

“It’s ‘cause any portion of those crops that we get are a ‘drop in the bucket’ so ta speak in comparison ta the people in the main part of the city, but we still celebrate with what we’ve got.” The source of the voice explains as it steps out from behind Ruggie, revealing an older hyena beastwoman that he wasn’t expecting to see until later.

“G-Grandma?! Why aren’t ya at the stall???” Ruggie exclaims in surprise to his grandmother’s amusement.

“Shyeheheh! What, am I not allowed to come an’ greet my *darling grandson* an’ his friends?” She says while pinching Ruggie’s cheek teasingly, causing his ears to flatten in annoyance, before turning towards his schoolmates, “So, you four must be some ‘a the ‘over the top classmates’ my grandson talks so much about. The name’s Yumna Bucchi, nice to meetcha!”

Yuu and the others are about to start introducing themselves before Grim jumps in front of them, “Myeh! ‘You FOUR?!’ Don’t ya dare forget to include the future great mage, Grim!” He exclaims before Yuu grabs him by the scruff.

Aside from that and the others having to hold Rook back from kneeling and kissing Yumna’s hand as a greeting, the rest of the introductions go relatively well and the group soon finds itself at the stall to start dividing up work.

The lineup they decide on is Ruggie, Yuu and Grim managing sales, Trey helping Yumna make the donuts and Rook and Silver attracting customers, which sounds all well and good in theory. In practice, however…

“Hey! That little cat thing up-charged me for my donut!” One customer complains.

“Oi! No I didn’t! Ya should learn how ta do the math–” Grim retaliates before Yuu clamps his hand over the direbeast’s mouth.

“I’m so sorry about him. Here’s your change.” The Prefect apologizes before ushering in the next customer that’s part of an ever-growing line, half of which are leaving disappointed due to Rook overselling the donuts by providing grand descriptions of them that only barely line up with the real things.

Not to mention how Silver is scaring away some of the other customers by sprinting up to them and practically ordering them to buy a donut.

From what Ruggie can tell, the only part of the operation that isn’t actively crashing and burning is Trey and Yumna with food prep, who are making donuts together without a care in the world.

He really should’ve seen this coming.

Before Ruggie knows it, they’re over halfway through the sales day as he hears his grandmother clap her hands to get their attention.

“Alright boys, we’re runnin’ low on supplies and Yuu here has volunteered ta go get the extra EXTRA ones from the house with me. Use this time ta take a breather and we’ll be back soon!” She announces before leaving with Yuu as Ruggie feels his shoulders slump from the release of stress.

"Are you sure it's in here, Miss Bucchi?" Yuu calls out while on his stomach and with over half of his body inside the Bucchi household's surprisingly deep hall closet.

"It's in there, we just hid it in the very back in case any robbers wanted to try their luck!" Yumna answers from the living room.

"Great." Yuu grumbles to himself as he spends the next few minutes crawling even further back into the closet and then another few minutes shimmying the box in question out of the tight space.

Finally returning to the living room with the moderately large and heavy box in hand, Yuu opens his mouth to let Yumna know he's back before seeing her sitting on the sofa while looking at the album Ruggie had snatched away Rook earlier that day with her ears drooping sadly, "Um, Miss Bucchi? What are you doing?" He asks cautiously.

The hyena woman sighs while turning the page, "Just...thinkin' about the past...and the future." She answers plainly before patting the spot next to her, inviting Yuu to sit, which he does after setting the box down.

Leaning over, Yuu sees pages and pages of what he assumes was Ruggie when he was younger and has to stifle a giggle from how adorable he was.

"Cute little rugrat, wasn't he?" Yumna says as if having read Yuu's mind, "I wish his mom could'a been around ta see the way his eyes sparkled whenever he got his plate 'a birthday donuts. It was one 'a the only times they weren't dull from hunger, after all."

Yuu's stifled laughter is replaced by a large lump in his throat as he stays quiet to let Yumna continue.

"Ya must've heard the story from him by now, right? How his mom, my daughter, died giving birth ta him and his pops, the bum, skipped out ta chase some fortune?" She asks.

Yuu nods silently.

“I’d say he’s lost so much already, but that would imply he was old enough ta acknowledge it as loss. I was the only one he could rely on for the longest time and I worry ‘bout how he’ll get along once I’m with his mom among the stars, which the Great Seven know is a time that’s only gettin’ closer.” She says melancholically as the Ruggie in the pictures gets older and older, “I guess what I’m sayin’ here is that I’d like ya help this old hag rest easy and be there for him once I can’t anymore.”

Yuu swallows as the pressure of such a request crashes over him like a ton of bricks, but his caring and feelings of friendship toward Ruggie allow him to speak, “I promise.” He responds with a nod, earning a tired, but appreciative smile from the old woman before the two finally leave to rejoin the others at the stall with the old leather album left on the couch, opened to a page containing a single photo of Ruggie smiling with his grandmother on the day he left for NRC.

After Yuu and Ruggie’s grandma return, the group meets the next few waves of customers head on and with much more efficiency since the hyena had gone over strict business strategies with the others while the two were gone.

Rook VASTLY tones down his product descriptions, Silver manages to flag down passersby like a normal person and, with Yuu’s help, Grim finally stops arguing with customers.

By the time they’re well and truly out of supplies, Ruggie looks over to see the sun setting on the horizon as the Raindrop Festival draws to a close, signalling the group’s soon departure.

After dismantling the stall, the group walks Yumna back to their house and prepares to see her off.

“It was great seein’ ya, Grandma. Don’t go bustin’ a hip while I’m gone, ya hear?” Ruggie says after giving her a goodbye hug, earning a light smack on the head, while the others prepare to leave.

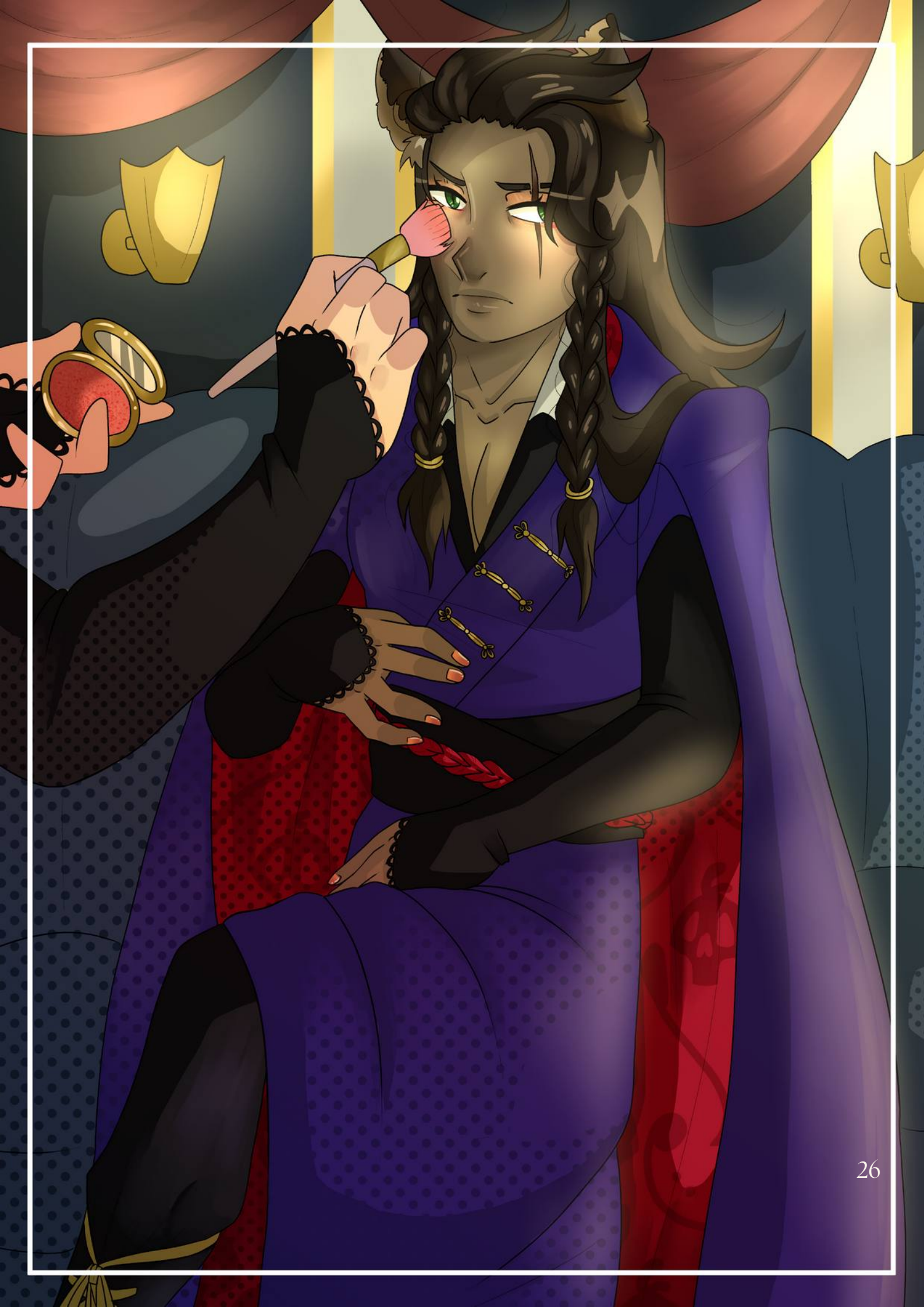
“Shyeheheh! Well, if I do, maybe these extra donuts I set aside’ll keep me company!” Yumna teases while holding a small box just out of reach before shoving it into her grandson’s arms with a fond smile upon seeing his disappointed expression.

“Looks like that photo you took finally finished developing, Yuu.” Ruggie hears Trey say as he gives his grandma a thank you hug.

“My! And what a marvelous photo it is!” Rook praises, “I assume you’ll be putting it in your album back at Ramshackle?”

“Actually, I think it belongs in someone else’s album.” Yuu responds as Ruggie lets go and turns around to see him walking towards Yumna and handing a photo he’d taken of all of them together to her, “Something to tide you over until you can see him again.”

Yumna blinks in surprise before a soft smile settles on her face, “Shyeheh…and I know he’ll be in good hands until I do.” She responds, much to everyone else’s confusion, before waving goodbye to them as they finally walk back towards the portal to NRC and the sun fully sets on the slum’s Raindrop Festival.



GOLDEN TICKET

Shu

A new morning came, but nothing seemed really new to Ruggie. Ever since he'd taken on a second part-time job to cover his grandmother's medical expenses, the hyena had barely had any spare time to relax and appreciate the present moment. Whether it was work, school or house chores, his mind was always busy with something and full of thoughts that only made his empty stomach hungrier.

Truthfully, this wasn't the first time his determination to survive made him numb to the world and the pleasure of being alive. But every day he still chose to wake up, dress up, and head to his first job of the day with the hopes that something (or maybe someone) would come and break him out of this cycle. Preferably before his body gave out and the hunger consumed him from the inside. So yes, clearly things had not been going well for him for a long time, but most days were a type of bad he could put up with. That day, however, was definitely not one of those.

Like every morning, he'd had an early start of the day to get to his job at one of the city's finest bakeries. He'd heard many good things about that job for a while–especially about the pay–and so, as soon as he'd seen the open call for new employees, Ruggie didn't hesitate to send in his application. The first two months had been tough, even for someone as resilient as himself. But the pay was worth it, and for a long time he'd been able to put up with the condescending looks from the high class customers (something he'd learned to do from many of his previous jobs and from life itself) without difficulty. Unfortunately, that ended as soon as the summer break was over and he began running into the students from the nearby highschool during his shifts.

Whether it was a spoiled child or a fancy old woman, the hyena had known better than to stoop to their level and be bothered by their maltreatment. But, when it came to people his own age...Ruggie could barely step up for himself. It wasn't because he took their words seriously, not really. It's just that sometimes it was hard to not feel inferior to people his own age who were clearly doing many times better than him. Just the memory of their arrogant smirks every time they told him to "keep the change" like they were doing some kind of goodwill for him was enough to sour his mood beyond repair.

And, to make his day worse, a similar kind of humiliation still awaited him at school. Whatever the professor had to say about his grades, Ruggie already knew. He was the one responsible for them, after all–which meant he wished they could improve the most. Thus, despite the results of his tests implying otherwise, he truly considered studying just as important as eating, and he was fully aware that the only possibility he'd ever have to get out of the shit hole his life was was through getting into college–something the likes of him could only dream of. Yet, as things stood, Ruggie didn't have the time to study nor the money to buy any reference material, and his teachers had long since grown tired of his “excuses”.

It was ironic, really, how the harder he worked to survive, the further he sunk. But, even on his worst days, the beastman still refused to accept this was all his life would ever be. So he stubbornly held onto the hopes that he'd be somewhere and someone else five years from now. For now though, all he could do was stand silently while the teacher called him out in front of the entire class for being the only one who didn't hand over his report. Again.

No amount of frustration was enough to stop his stomach from rumbling all throughout the rest of the morning, though. And so, as soon as the break bell rang, Ruggie went straight to look for the bag of baked goods he’d gotten from his job earlier inside his backpack. What his boss had prepared for him wasn't anything fancy really, probably just some leftovers from the previous day. But, to him this meant having at least one guaranteed meal every day, and that's all that mattered.

However, as soon as his search came up empty, he realized it was just not in his luck to have things go his way that day. He had been so focused on leaving before the annoying customers started arriving that morning that he'd completely forgotten to pick up the bag from the counter before leaving. Thus, without anything else to fill his stomach with, his only other resource was to take money from his own pocket and pay for his food–something he really hated to do. In the end, he settled for one of the school’s cafeteria’s cheapest buns and went on with his day trying to ignore the lingering hunger the best he could. Hopefully, he'd get home early after his last job and get to eat dinner with his grandma. That was something to look forward to at the end of every day.

Keeping this thought in mind, he did his best to push through one last shift at his babysitting job. At the end of the day, Ruggie walked back home with the sun already setting on the horizon behind his back. Despite being used to the taxing routine, days like this reminded him that even he had limits. Forcing himself to smile one last time, Ruggie greeted his grandmother upon entering the house. At her old age, Ruggie believed she had enough on her plate to be worrying about him, so he always tried his best to look his best for her.

His grandmother's hands moved slowly but firmly as she kneaded some sort of dough, probably for bread. Ruggie simply looked at her work, a million thoughts crossing his mind while the woman spoke to him about her day. Behind all the love and admiration the hyena had for her, a hint of resentment always seeped through the corners. A hopeful, ignorant and selfish wish that the woman should've raised her son better than a man who ran away at every problem. But, just by looking at himself in the mirror he knew that he was far from being like that coward he had for a father, so Ruggie tried to convince himself that maybe she wasn't to blame. That she was just as much of a victim as he and everyone that man had abandoned. Even if he would never really know if that was true.

A giggle snapped him out of his thoughts and Ruggie suddenly realized he'd been staring blankly at the woman for a while.

“You must be tired, my boy. Go and wash yourself. I'll call you when dinner's ready.”

Of all the voices he'd heard all day, those were the only words his brain registered with clear detail. Ruggie smiled at her again and did as told, happy to take a moment for himself. A cold shower later, Ruggie walked out of the bathroom with a towel around his neck and some drops of water still dripping from his tail. He would make sure to clean the floor later, but for now he needed to lay in bed for at least five minutes and rest. And that's exactly what he did.

His eyelids felt so heavy he could barely gather the strength to keep himself awake, but he knew better than to allow himself that. With many pending assignments and material to go over, the hyena wouldn't get to sleep for at least three more hours. But, before he could even enjoy a brief moment of peace after a mentally exhausting day, Ruggie’s ear suddenly perked up at the sound of tapping against his window. It was too much of a strange and disturbing noise to ignore it, so he quickly sat up and began searching for the source of it. Thankfully, he didn't need to look too far for it.

Almost imperceptible in the darkness of the night (if not for its golden eyes), a dark crow looked back at him through the window glass as if waiting for him to open up.

“What’s a crow doing around here?” Ruggie stared back at the bird with a deep frown in his face and a weird feeling already settling in his stomach.

Ruggie opened the window with every intention to capture it, only to realize he'd underestimated the animal's wit. For just as soon as his hands stretched out, the bird took off, putting some distance between them before dropping something it'd been holding with its claws. Ruggie barely managed to catch it in time before the wind could sweep it away, and this gave the crow an opening to fly away. The next time the hyena raised his sight the bird was long gone, only leaving a stray feather behind which he also made sure to catch.

He didn't have much time to think about it before his eyes landed on the wax seal decorating the envelope and his eyes opened wide with shock. Seconds turned into an eternity before he regained control of his body again and walked back to his bed, letting himself fall heavy on it. It didn't take high deduction skills to understand what that encounter had meant, but it did take him a lot of belief to come to terms with it.

“Night Raven College.” All the exhaustion from before was immediately replaced with a rush of adrenaline and fear as he read the name on the seal.

Ruggie had never in his life imagined himself being so close to one of these letters. But now that it was happening he could only think of bad things. He knew that there was no such thing as a “rejection” letter, for nobody ever really “applied” to that school. But, putting two and two together, the hyena could not find a single reason to believe this letter was an invitation and he wasn't just getting his hopes up for nothing. He had nothing to offer them, after all.

It wasn't until a knock on his door startled him that the beastman noticed he'd been gripping the paper to the point of wrinklinling the edges. Soon enough he let go of the tension and tried to smooth it over.

“I'm coming in, dear.” His grandmother's voice came from the other side of the door, and before he could begin to reply, she’d already opened it allowing herself in, “Are you alright? I've been calling you for a while–”

“Grandma, I...” Despite having the intention to reassure the old woman by forcing his lips into a small grin, the trembling of his hands and voice gave him away.

“What's wrong dear? What is that thing you're holding?” The woman didn't hesitate before joining her grandson in bed, sitting as close to him as possible.

And then she noticed.

“Hey grandma, what should I do? I don't want to look at it. What am I even supposed to do?” Ruggie spoke up before the woman could even ask anything herself. As if he'd been dying to ask these questions his whole life.

And maybe he'd been.

“It's okay, my boy.” Despite the emotions overflowing from the boy she'd raised like a son, the woman still managed to keep calm and smile warmly at him. As if she'd known this moment would come her whole life and now it was just coming full circle.

“D-do you really think they'll want someone like me?”

“If anything, that envelope in your hands is all the proof you need, my dear.”

In truth, Ruggie was certain that just because he’d been invited, that didn't mean he'd be welcome. But taking this opportunity could be his one chance to prove himself and if he didn't take it then he could never look at the woman sitting next to him in the eyes again.

“Now, let's go to the kitchen and find something to open that seal, shall we?” His grandmother suggested.

“Yeah...Let's.” Ruggie replied without further thoughts.

Even if he still wanted to run from it, the choice had already been made.

WELCOME TO...!

Phuuca/Alien

Jack's hometown was holding an event for the Northern Lights, the Auroras; it was scheduled to take place on the first full moon after because of the stories and myths that still persisted in the modern-day. He himself believes in some of them, even though much of his decision making now is rooted in morality and logic.

His hometown myths are things he rarely talks about; he's mentioned the people who turn into wolves under moonlight in broad strokes. Although that specific band of magic is nothing more than a fairytale, it was a very funny coincidence when his Unique Magic manifested and he became a wolf while wandering the snow. If his younger siblings were bad, his parents would use him as an example of what the Lights would do as a punishment.

Scary in the moment, but really funny in hindsight.

With his hometown commemorating a dance to celebrate the myth and meaning behind the Northern Lights, he knew exactly whom he wanted to bring to the celebration. It was a means of paying back the thoughtfulness Leona had when he first asked Jack to come to Sunset Savannah.

Even if the reason was rather scummy and entirely on-brand of his housewarden, he was thought about fondly and that's what mattered to him.

He thought of bringing Ruggie too. The hyena would enjoy the familial party that was a "potlatch". The only danger that would come with Ruggie attending the potlatch is his family overfeeding him and sending the beastman into a food coma.

He could hear it already:

"You're too skinny. Have some more!"
"Are you sure you're 17?"
"What are they feeding you? Because it's clearly not enough!"
"I asked you if you wanted some more."

He could see, in his mind's eye, Ruggie spinning from all the offerings.

"It's, currently, peak winter season in my part of the country. Which means there is almost no daylight. At most, there's about six hours of sun. That number will continue to dwindle until the winter solstice, then it's anywhere from three days to a week of no sun."

He looked over their faces and waited for the eventual shock that would occur when he talked about the day-night cycle. His home was so far, up north it was completely normal to have anywhere from weeks to months of near-total sunlight and near-total darkness. It is nearing the period of the year with total darkness, which meant it was going to become much colder.

Jack is trying to take the necessary precautions when taking Ruggie and Leona to his hometown because they were used to violent heat, sandy winds and the sun scorching their backs on the regular. He felt the full, unexpected blast of the heat when he was portalled to Sunset Savannah during the Bead Brawl; it was very unpleasant being that sick for three whole days.

He's trying to prevent something similar happening, but in the opposite direction.

"Usually, the temperature this far north gets anywhere from -10 to -20 celsius on average for most of the winter. However, it will be getting to -40 during the peak of winter but, for now, it will be in that -10 to -20 range. Because of that, I will have you both wear my dad's old winter gear."

He holds up a large bundle of fur; two parkas, two pairs of pants, gloves and two pairs of furry boots. One of the parkas has been dyed a shade of blue-green with magic and the other is a red color. Jack's own parka is a traditional shade of brown with minimal beading and patterns. He's always liked his casual gear to be rather simple, both as an expression of his aesthetic preferences and for practical purposes.

"On Leona-san, they should fit, if not be a little over-sized. On Ruggie-san…"

Ruggie snatched the blue-green gear and put them on faster than Jack could process. The fur and hyde swallowed Ruggie's form. The parka looked more like a dyed potato sack, the pants billowed above where he attempted to tuck the fabric in.

"A lot over-sized by the looks of it. How tall was your old man when he wore this?"

"He was about Leona-san's height."

"Ah, no wonder. It's about the same size as my uniform. It should fit you like a glove then."
"I have no plans on wearing the jacket."

Both Jack and Ruggie looked at Leona like he grew a second head. Jack felt himself short-circuit from how suddenly the proclamation of not wearing the parka was.

"Leona-san, I really thinking you should wear the parka I'm giving you because—"

"I trust the mirror to drop us at your door. Similar to how it dropped us off right in the middle of the plaza in Afterglow City."

Before I got a heat stroke...wait...

"Leona-san, the mirror's abilities to reliably transport anyone to-and-from my home is faulty at best and completely unreliable at worst."

The Northern Lights, the Auroras, were an ancient magic, older than the dirt he walks on. The Dark Mirror of Night Raven was "but a baby", as his neighbor put it, in comparison to how old and how long the Auroras have been around. The Spirits in the Sky were there far before the first of their people settled on the snow of his hometown and will outlive them long after the last of his bloodline draws their final breath.

That kind of magic was bound to interfere with something newer like the Dark Mirror. That kind of magic interfered with a lot of their technology as well; it's why a lot of them had to travel farther down south if they wanted to catch up with any specific TV show or get an internet signal.

Jack himself, when he first saw Leona play on TV, wasn't even in his hometown. He had to track down Leona's SpellDrive career through the morning newspaper and praying for a cable signal to make it through the Spirits in the Sky.

"I trust the Dark Mirror will transport us to the correct location. I will not need your parka, but I do appreciate your father's generosity."

...he didn't quite know how to respond to that.

So he didn't.

"Take us to the Northernmost Town of Pyroxene."

The Dark Mirror swirled and Jack clutched his bags under his arm. The feeling of total submersion and vertigo made him nauseous for all of five seconds before he felt snow crunch beneath his feet.
He heard the gasps of disbelief, as the sky was alive with the Auroras. He quickly looked away.

Huh, they came early this year…

They were quite a ways away from his house, the lights of town turning the snow colors of yellow and gold. The coast had finally frozen over, a perfect reflection of the heavens. It was hard to make out individual houses from this vantage point, especially with the ocean of pine trees blocking the way, but there was no mistaking where they were.
He held out his arm and smiled wide as he introduced his upperclassmen to the view.

"Welcome to my Hometown! Don't look at the Aurora for too long. You'll get snatched into the sky."

When he looked in detail at his fellow Night Raven College students and looked down to see…

"Leona-san, you're shivering…"

His housewarden was curled in a ball in the snow. His curls spilling over his shoulders like a blanket. Even his tail was curled around his legs, trembling.

Ruggie, standing next to him, was completely fine. His hands in the pockets of his hand-me-down parka and shoes devoid of snow, despite a small handful of straw snowflakes. He looked down at their housewarden, bored and tired.

"I didn't think it was going to feel like this–the cold."

"I TOLD YOU HOW COLD IT WAS GOING TO BE!!"

He tossed Leona the spare parka underneath his arm and watched him scramble to put it on in complete silence.

Except for a single comment Ruggie shared:

"Jack-kun did tell you how cold it was going to be. He really did."

"Can it, Ruggie."

Later, when the three of them settled on the floor of the dining room and all the food had been prepared, Jack was able to see tears build in Ruggie's eyes as they ate dinner. Leona was apathetic towards the flavor, but still thankful for the meal.

Ruggie looked genuinely distraught. "Jack-kun, I–"

"?"

"All this food is good, and the sauce is wonderful, but I can't eat it all."

He keels over, his face one of tearful contentment and joy. Happy panting and squeaks emulating from the hyena while splayed out on the floor.

"I think I'm going into a food coma."

"Try not to throw up in your sleep."

"Trust me: I won't."

Welcome to my HomeTown!

Leona-san,
you're shivering...
I didn't think it was going to feel like this.
I TOLD YOU HOW COLD IT WAS GOING TO BE!!

IN MEMORY OF.

RainingStorms

Leona's developed a small habit. When no one's looking, he takes a couple of sheets from Falena's ever-increasing pile of paperwork, runs back to his room, sits by his window overlooking the royal gardens with a pen in hand, and pretends he's working on ingenious kingdom blueprints with his father. The birds, chirping incessantly in the background, add to the scenario—he imagines them as Kifaji, always lecturing, always scolding, hovering over him with that same severe frown on his face. Not that Leona ever cares what that squawky codger thinks. Maybe.

If no one comes looking for him after several hours, Leona pretends not to notice. He's helping Falena with his paperwork after all, like a good prince. The servants should know not to disturb him while he's planning out the future of their kingdom. It doesn't matter that Leona's only nine—he's smart enough to know the adults have no idea what they're doing, so it's up to him to show them. The capital could use some restructuring here; the slums need renovations and resources there; some of the sewer pipes running underground need rerouting; and if they set up some industrial factories, it could provide more energy, more jobs.

Leona's still young and there's a lot he hasn't learned yet, as reluctant as he is to admit it. So, whenever he gets stuck trying to work something out, he takes some of the thick textbooks Kifaji often forces into Falena's hands and reads through them. Bookmarks pages he thinks are relevant. Rereads difficult paragraphs until he understands them a little better. Highlights key terms and ideas he wants to learn more about later. From infrastructure, business, economics, politics, agriculture—he reads about them all and jots down his findings on his papers, his set of revolutionary kingdom blueprints in the making.

There's a lot he hasn't experienced yet, too. Like magic. In their history, the kings of their land were often mages, and his father is no exception. Even Falena has magic, a warm, carefree, life-giving sort that matches the blazing red-oranges of his mane. It stands to reason Leona'll have his own too, sometime soon. He hopes it'll be more powerful than his brother's, more life-giving...

If he continues reading into the late hours of the night and still no one comes looking for him, Leona pretends he's the one ignoring them. Great things need peace and quiet, he tells himself, even if it comes with enveloping shadows and the moon as his only companion. Nothing he doesn't enjoy. But, when it gets a little too cold and a little too lonely, Leona illuminates the silence with his dreams and ideals.

He writes it all on his papers—the visions he has of Afterglow Savannah, radiant in the wake of the rising sun; the people cheering for him as he stands upon a replica of the fabled Pride Rock; himself, older and wiser and king of everything the light touches. He pictures the servants bowing their heads in his presence, not out of fear and thinly veiled contempt, but respect, addressing him with words of genuine praise instead of careful lies. Then, after curling himself under his quilts and closing his eyes, he lets his dreams grow bigger, brighter—Kifaji being a little kinder, Falena listening to him instead of treating him like a naive, clueless child, the council elders acknowledging his efforts. And, in his sweetest fantasies, his father finally smiles and watches the stars with him.

Falling asleep is easy when Leona's surrounded by the warmth of his dreams. He wants to be the greatest ruler this land has ever seen. No matter what Kifaji or the elders or Falena or his father say—he'll show them that he can do it, that he's worthy of the throne. He'll bring life and growth and show them he's not just some brat who doesn't know what he's doing, not when he has proof of his efforts in his hands. His papers, his desired futures, lie scattered around him like a cocoon. Constant, present, all within reach.

When he manifests his magic, he thinks. When he turns ten, he resolves himself. Leona'll show them, then, the culmination of his ambitions. They won't be able to deny him anymore.

He'll be the smartest and most powerful, and maybe then will he finally be king (loved).

When Leona wakes up, it's to an itch festering in his fingertips. It worsens when he's done getting ready for the day, sparking through his skin, hairline cracks that make his nerves tingle like he's burning alive. Even now, while he's being tutored by Kifaji in the royal library, the ache makes holding his pen frustratingly painful. There's a... *sensation* swelling within him, but he doesn't know what, and it's unsettling.

Did he fall ill with something? Slept on his arms the wrong way? Falena can't know about this—if he does, his nagging will only get worse.

"Kifaji," Leona says, interrupting the old chamberlain's lecture on how their hierarchical traditions came to be, "I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

Unsurprisingly, Kifaji stops and gives him a frown of disapproval. "We've only just started, Your Highness."

"But I already know this. It's boring."

"Don't be disrespectful, it's important to understand the roots of our country and people. Boring or not, as prince, you must learn this."

The throbbing in his hands intensifies, gnawing at something deeper inside him. Leona slaps his pen on the table and pushes himself away from it, chair scraping harshly against the floor. "I don't care, I'm tired of this." He stands and balls his aching hands into fists, half-aware of his tail thrashing by his feet in obvious discomfort.

Of course, the chamberlain notices it. "Is something wrong with your hands, Your Highness?"

Leona's face scrunches into a pout. He shifts his gaze to one of the bookshelves nearby, refusing to look at Kifaji. "Nothing's wrong."

"I will tell His Highness Falena."

"... They hurt."

"You could have simply said so." The chamberlain sighs, reaching out and taking Leona's hands in his own larger, more calloused ones. "Where does it hurt?"

“It’s…” Leona hesitates. How can he describe the ache in his fingers? That it feels like something is sapping his flesh dry? That there is something roiling bone-deep, soul-deep within him and it’s eating him alive?

At his continued silence, Kifaji traces the skin of Leona’s palms with his thumb. Frowns, suspicion flickering in his dark eyes. Finally, he stands and ushers Leona out of the library, saying something along the lines of getting him checked out by the doctors, and then something else that sounds like worry, but Leona is barely listening.

His throat is suddenly parched, and no amount of swallowing his saliva and licking his lips is helping. He fidgets, a hand reaching to his flattened ears as they start to ring. In the depths of his mind, he thinks he can see words swirling about—a chant, maybe a blessing, or a curse. His heart is beating too fast, too loud, blood sizzling under his skin, breaths shallow and chest taut and gut hollow with a *hunger* so pervasive he wants to recoil from the depths of himself, from whatever that’s trying to claw its way out of him.

Kifaji is still saying something, but Leona cannot hear him. He tries to back away from the chamberlain until large hands press against his back, urging him forward, and Leona stumbles into the stone corridors. He’s vaguely aware of the servants bustling around him—even through the haze of pain, he can feel their pointed stares digging into him. Watching him. Hating him.

Distantly, he remembers his dreams. The hunger becomes more intense.

Don’t look at me like that, his mind sobs, a plea so desperate it sends a shudder through him. Then hands push him again and there are voices and he stumbles and trips and the world whirls, full of bright lights he cannot reach. He crashes into a warm body, his fingers dig into cloth and skin, his palms grow hot and dry and—

Something cracks.

Someone screams.

That deep, deep hunger lunges out of him in a flash of gold, and with it, everything feels right again. The pain eases, his fingers relax, he can breathe. There’s something wet on his hands, gold continues to fall all around him and, for a moment, Leona thinks it might be raining—the Savannah’s greatest wish and blessing.

But what lands on his face is not warm or life-giving or carefree—

It's *sand*.

Dripping from the ceiling crumbling above him; he stands in a pit of sand that seeps between his toes, clings to his clothes, gets in his eyes and makes him flinch. It's everywhere, falling like the rain of nightmares, desiccating everything and leaving cracks—everything but him.

The ringing in his ears subsides. All he can hear now is screaming.

"The prince is cursed!"

"What terrifying power!"

"Get the doctor! She's *dying*!"

And Leona finally sees it—a maid spasming on the floor, half her clothes disintegrated, her lips open in a raspy wail, and her skin...

It's cracked open. Bleeding, yet not—her blood has dried so thoroughly it crusts around her wounds, tendrils of red-brown trailing up her legs to her hips and beyond. It's as if her very flesh became glass and porcelain and everything too fragile, sucked dry of the life that usually thrums within her.

Other servants are running around, yelling, pointing, trying to help, and Leona doesn't know how this all happened. They're staring at him, he realises. Why—

He looks down at his hands, and it clicks at last.

There's blood on his fingertips, crumbling into dust. Not his blood, the maid's. On his hands. Then he takes in his surroundings and sees more cracks, more desiccation, nearby plants shrivelling up, insect carcasses on the ground. The eroding ceiling, the broken ground, the bleeding, *hateful* people and this overwhelming sand—

This is the result of magic. *His* magic.

Leona did this.

The servants continue whispering, their eyes round with fright, bodies trembling with apprehension and disgust. "Cursed power, cursed child, cursed second son," he hears them say. "He almost killed someone. He *can* kill someone."

No, Leona wants to scream. No, he's not. He didn't.

"He's a drought, a disaster, death."

He's *not*, he's not he didn't want this—

"The kingdom will fall to ruin."

Ringing returns to his ears, accompanied by dread so frigid it seizes in his chest and leaves him gasping for air. He whirls around, sees more hateful gazes, feels them stab into him, rip into his skin. Sees Kifaji trying to manage the chaos.

"*Kifaji*—" Leona sobs. His tears fall and wither away. "Kifaji, *help me*."

The chamberlain turns, shoulders tense, and any semblance of comfort Leona hopes to find crumbles into the sand he stands upon.

Kifaji's face is pinched with stress. Anger. Something sorrowful. His feathers stand ruffled, and he looks years older. Agitated. As if unwilling to move closer. Unwilling to help.

And the only reason Leona can think of is that he's afraid.

Just like the others.

Before the chamberlain can say anything, do anything, Leona bolts away. He tries (fails) to ignore the cry he hears behind him, pretends it's cheering. Tries (fails) to ignore the way the path ahead opens up as the lingering servants move to avoid him, pretends it's a parade dedicated to him.

As he runs, he keeps hearing their whispers—death, demon, doomed. Feels their fear clinging to his skin, choking him. Tries to pretend they're praising and smiling at him instead.

But it fails, he fails, it's not *it's not*—

It's not my fault, he wants to cry. It's not him. He never wanted this. His magic was supposed to be warm, life-giving, like Falena's, like his father's. Not this. Anything but this.

I'm not a curse.

Deliriously, Leona thinks—he has proof of it, of his efforts, his desires, his want for the sunlight like everyone else. He just needs to show them his dreams. The servants, Kifaji, then Falena and his father will see them, see how bright and worthy they are, and realise this is all one big misunderstanding.

Leona can do it. He can still do it. He won't ruin the kingdom. It's not his fault.

It won't be.

Yet, when he skids in front of his room, tumbling past the door towards his dreams, he fails to notice the cracks splintering the walls and ground in his wake. Fails to notice the shadows creeping after him as the lights dissolve one by one into dust. Fails to register the same desperate clawing in his gut from before as he reaches his desk, reaches for his papers, his—

The moment he touches the fragile sheets, they break apart into golden sand.

And Leona forgets how to breathe.

The world comes to a halt around him as he watches his efforts—his dreams, his desires, his futures—slip through his fingers, almost mocking in how gently they go. Like wishful thinking. Like they've never existed and he's only realising it now, nine years too late, forced out of his self-made cocoon by his own accursed hands.

No no *no no no*—

Something raw and wretched falls from his lips, a sound he never thought he could make. Desperately, he grabs at the sand, tries to piece each grain back together until they are whole and warm and worthy again. Remembers in vivid, wrenching detail the smiles and praise and fanfare his ideals promised him.

Give it back. Give it back to him.

That sweet, fantastical, *beautiful* future—

His face burns with dry tears. Around him, his room shakes from the force of his magic, his sorrow, cracking and crumbling into more sand. The curtains fall and he's swallowed whole by the shadows, denying him warmth and growth and life, and it's too dry, too harsh on his lungs, he can't breathe, let him breathe, it hurts hurts *hurts* he needs help won't somebody *help him*—

But all that answers is silence.

His throat is parched, his skin freezing, his gut squeezing with unbearable hollowness. There's no moon to accompany him this time, not while the sun still shines yet refuses to bathe him in its rays, leaving him to drown in a golden grave of his own making.

No one looks for him. Not Kifaji. Not Falena. Even though it's not him, it's not his fault, he never wanted this—

Why would they?

He is hunger.

He is thirst.

He is the one who robbed himself of tomorrow.

And even though Leona is smart and powerful, a child who's seen as a curse will never have the chance to be king (loved).

Nillay
2026

ASCENSION

Miss T.C. Nova

Pads of silent steps skim the stone floor, drowned by the howls and haws of feral beasts. A rhythmic pounding belies the wild bellows, beckoning the rash and reckless further into the cold, stone shaft and into the pit of rebellion. Shadows flicker, fleeing the paltry light of the wall-mounted flames that struggle to show the way through the otherwise pitch-black tunnel. Heavy air weighs on the traveler, whispering hollow taunts into rounded ears.

For all the heckling and hassling, perhaps there should be more to fear—all this racketeering isn't for his benefit after all. Still, the anticipation mounts in his chest; Leona has always been ready, even as they broke down the door and dragged him away half-dressed. Even now, the thrill simmers beneath his skin.

The cackling and snarling at its peak, the stomping of boots against the stone, he can barely hear himself think as the escorts part to reveal the cavern at the end of the trail. Thralls of beasts line the walls, calling out in their most primal voices, jeering at fresh prey.

A firm shove against the spine forces him into the blinding pillar of light sourced from a hole in the cavern ceiling. A sneer thrown back at the offender reveals only that the wall of heathens has closed the gap. There's no going back now.

Taking in the derision and outrage, the young man breathes deep and lifts his chin. Harlequin eyes scan the writhing mass of monsters, falling upon the sole beast who hasn't given into this frenzied pandemonium.

Just beyond the light's reach, a burning, golden gaze watches. There's no doubt that a fiend's grin hides in the darkness, sizing up the next stripe in his record. Despite his refrain from the mad jubilations, this is the most threatening person in the hoard.

A boot breaks into the light. Immediately, hisses ripple the crowd to quell the mania, silence reigning by pure tension. Shadows slip from his form, revealing the tall, brawny young man with olive skin. Rounded ebony ears with white spots lie nestled in wild orange hair while a striped tail sways behind him. Muscles flex imposingly in the way his arms fold and a wicked grin shows off glinting fangs.

His voice rumbles with smug conceit. “Looks like you’ve had one hell of a wakeup call.”

The response is a simple flick of the ear.

“What’s wrong, little prince? Cat got your tongue?”

Brutish laughter breaks through the onlookers, going quickly silent at a simple gesture.

Unimpressed by the tasteless joke, Leona finally speaks. “You just gonna stand there and make fun of your underclassman? Or you gonna hand over that title to someone who actually deserves it?”

By no means is the upperclassman put off. The onlookers, on the other hand, threaten to riot.

“Well if that’s how you see it, then you know what’s gonna happen.” Hands tug at the leather vest that drops to the dirt. “Knowing that, you still wanna do this?”

Hands jam into pockets of the jeans he only has due to having fallen asleep in them. Head tilting back, staring down his nose in defiance, an equally devilish grin curls at Leona’s lip.

“If you wanna chicken out, go ahead.”

An orange brow quirks, looking none perturbed; in fact, he seems entertained at the very least. Excited at most.

“Aight then. I hope you’re ready.”

Without warning, the space between them vanishes. Only half-prepared, Leona stumbles back, losing a foot to the leg sweep; however, he manages to save himself enough to duck beneath the wide haymaker and regain his bearings. It’s just in time too, to offset the follow up swing, except this time, he doesn’t back away. Instead, he steps forward, driving his shoulder into the tiger’s chest with enough force to push back. His quick act stumbles the upperclassman, earning satisfying awe from the audience.

Golden eyes find his emerald gaze. The surprise in them quickly turns to sheer enthusiasm.

Savanaclaw holds tradition with very little regard, but this the entire dorm rallies to endorse. This is the establishment of the hierarchy—the determination of the king—and he would be damned if he had to bow to another weak, incapable leader.

No, he refused to let the crown slip him a second time, not when he actually has the power to do something about it.

Right, left, right, right: the lion keeps up with his opponent's speed, spotting an opening in which to throw his own sucker punch to combo chain. Another haymaker hurtles towards him, the solid swing enough to break up the onslaught.

By no means is Leona the first to challenge the tiger for his throne. At least a dozen others have attempted to lay claim in just the few months since the year started. Each and every time the king has won standing with little doubt that he was meant to remain there. This goliath has size on his side, granting him a longer reach. He's got plenty of strength to back him up, perhaps a bit more than the sophomore anticipated. There's also the fact that he's smarter than the average dorm brute. Those challengers never stood a chance.

So when Leona threw down the gauntlet, the heathens howled their laughter. They mocked his upbringing, called him spoiled and entitled. No heed was given the opinions of mindless beasts, so long as his challenge was honored. Because this was planned.

Buckling down, Leona's focus goes straight to dodging and blocking to reserve his stamina. By pure strength alone he can't guarantee his victory, but hands down he has the advantage in cunning. This moment was carefully chosen; he bided his time watching those previous challenges, watching his housewarden train, finding the flaws that would hand him the crown.

Another swing misses by a margin in which Leona feels the wind stir. He cut that dodge close, calculated—just like his decision to sleep in these pants. Foot planted behind the tiger's, the lion draws his magic pen and lets loose a gust that sends his opponent tumbling across the dirt.

A cacophony roars in the cavern, encouraging the simper on Leona's face. The one thing that these dimwits seem to forget is that Savanaclaw's rule is by strength—no one ever said that had to be just physical. Finally, the upperclassman's amusement falters.

Now a test of magic, the upperclassman's stratagem begins to fall apart. As he had with all his previous battles, he spent a significant amount of energy right at the start in the hopes of knocking out his opponent early. All Leona had to do was draw out the fight to drain his stamina before starting the onslaught of spells to swing the scales in his favor.

To his merit, the junior isn't failing any classes and can certainly take a beating as he tries to keep up with retorting spells of his own.

Except Leona is going to keep him on his toes, because this isn't just about magic either and a well-placed fist across the face reminds the housewarden of that.Managing and manipulating both skills at once isn't an inherently common trait among members of Savanaclaw, but Leona has grown up his whole life learning to leverage whatever advantage he can scrounge.

Side stepping the flaming spell, Leona smirks and unleashes a wind spell that bashes into the upperclassman. It's a shame he remains standing, but Leona definitely has the magic reserves to dole out further punishment.

The waver of the light drags that harlequin gaze up, where a mass of water is crashing towards him. An immediate attempt is made to lunge out of the path of the attack.

His heart skips as the ground slips from beneath him. Knees scrape against the ground, leaving him destined to suffer the wrath of water. And the thing that condemned him was the one thing he didn't plan for: the housewarden's vest.

Soaked through, Leona has no time to recover before a pair of hands hold him down and start wailing. Pinned—at his opponent's mercy—the prince endures blow after blow of pure strength beating down on him. He made a single mistake and now he's paying for it.

Finally, the housewarden relents, stumbling back. Enjoyment returns in that crooked grin, a malicious laugh rumbling from the monarch. Every muscle in Leona's body quivers, trying to drag him off the wet stone.

"Give up now, little prince," the tiger taunts. "And I'll make sure they go easy on you. Can't have that pretty face get any more scuffed up now, can we." The crowd of lackeys cackle.

The faintest fear flickers in the back of the lion's mind. The great, clever, powerful Leona Kingscholar, brought down by a stupid piece of fabric. His lack of attention to unexpected variables has placed him on the brink of losing. Maybe he wasn't ready for this; maybe he's meant to kneel before this man, just like his brother.

Bristling hatred infests his chest. Teeth bare in frustration as he staggers to his feet. Pain aches in his muscles, blood pounds beneath bruising skin. He's leaving this cavern king or unconscious.
The single word—furious, frustrated, seething—grates in his throat.

"No."

Fangs glint in that predator's grin. "You asked for it."

Fire ignites in a rushing wall. Angry, determined, Leona lifts a hand, words roaring in his heart. Though the heat grazes skin, the flame never gets the chance to. Within his reach, the fire dissolves into a wave of dust that blows past. Without hesitation, Leona bolts through the downpour of sand.

Likely believing he'd won, the housewarden is not prepared for the sudden proximity of his opponent. A foot comes forward, hooking around the inside of the elder's ankle and tearing out the stability of his stance, leaving him down on one knee.

The tiger's amber eyes widen, realizing that this is the end of his reign.

An almost-manic grin slips Leona's lips. "Though I appreciate the offer, I won't be so kind."

And with that, an elbow comes swinging. The bone strikes across the housewarden's face and he hits the ground with a heavy thud.

There's thick silence throughout the cavern. Baited breath waits for the junior to rise, but he remains out cold against the stone floor.

Standing straight, the lion shoves the mane from his face. As his chest heaves, those glowing eyes scan the on-lookers, all left in shock. Adrenaline still coursing through his veins, the king lets out a roar that shakes the cavern. Pure satisfaction floods his system at each and every monster bending a knee.

Leona's magic pen rises. He's held back long enough to avoid attention, but hell, if he's going to lead this motley pack of heathens, he might as well show off what he can do. In his palm, the pen shifts, expanding into a staff befitting a king of beats. Perhaps this will stomp any ideas others may have to dethrone him next.

Propping his new stave against his shoulder, the lion tips his chin with a smirk. At this, the pack begins to close in on the upperclassman that has finally begun to rouse.

There's one last thing about the rite of succession in this unruly dorm of beasts and monsters. A hazing—a gift from the king to his subjects for their patience and a reminder that even royalty can become the next meal.

Good thing Leona has no intention of losing his crown.

SAVANNA
CLAW

the golden shi-shi

HEARTBEAT, MY HEARTBEAT

Soru

A/N: This was supposed to be a Leona x reader. Damn.

To be fair, as a writer, you've accepted many random gigs before. It's hard being creative in a world where quantity is better than quality— you've seen the number of people in the gig agency drop over the years, people content in the small jobs they've gotten instead of suffering through the creative process, and really? You can't blame them. "Oi, Yuu!" you hear someone call your name. "Come take a look at this request."

BAND MANAGER AND CREATIVE LEAD - temporary gig, minimum 1 month, maximum 6 months. Must be able to handle schedules and studio timings and keep up with artists and creative types. Bonus if not annoying.

And below that, a simple sentence, underlined in red glitter pen— **ASK FOR RUGGIE BUCCHI. BAND NAME: NOXUS.**

"Noxus?" you mutter as your friend nods. "That's such an odd name for a band."

"Give it a shot anyways." they respond before hearing someone else call their name, and as you're left alone with your thoughts, you sigh. *Sure*, you think to yourself as you pack your bag, fingers brushing against the crudely constructed flier. *I'll give this a shot.*

Standing in front of a rusting iron door spray painted and beautified with drawings and iconography you couldn't understand, you flinch slightly as the door swings open, revealing a tall, muscular, lion beastman, his hair woven into braids tied up into a ponytail, with the most eerie green eyes. "What d'ya want." he growls, and the lip piercing twitches a little with the movement of his lips.

“I’m the manager you requested.” you look him in the eye as long as you can before you look away, tugging at the sleeves of your jacket as you fidget around. The entire place smells like cigarettes as the man stares you down before rolling his eyes and sighing.

“I didn’t request anyone.” he scowls, looking at you like you’d not only offended him, but all his ancestors and his descendants with the word ‘request’. Rolling your eyes, you hand him the flier, and he crumples it in his hand, tossing it somewhere behind his shoulder and leaving the door wide open behind him as he walks back inside.

“Ruggie!” he calls, and a skinny, much lither, hyena beastman scurries outside from another room. “You fuckin’ requested a manager?”

“Yeah, man— I dunno how much I’d be able to do now that Grammy’s in the hospital again. Hi, I’m Ruggie,” he turns, looking at you and extending a hand to shake. Calluses littered his hands, and his easy smile brought some invisible freckles on his cheeks to life. “You here to be our temporary band manager?”

“Seems like it,” you smile. “I have zero experience in managing bands, but I’ve done a few similar things so—”

“You can chill and go at your own pace, don’t worry.” Ruggie grins. “We ain’t made it big or anythin’ yet.”

Calling the first rehearsal of theirs you’d seen anything except a mess would be a lie.

Jack, the youngest of the trio, was the main vocalist— gentle in a way that you wouldn’t expect from a guy with his height and build, he shook your hand nervously and with a smile. He offers you a stool near the mic stand and asks your name twice, just to get it right. “Thanks for joining us.” he murmurs earnestly.

Behind him, Ruggie mutters something intelligible on the phone, adjusting his guitar. “Fuck if I know,” you hear him say, and you blink, fishing in your bag for your notepad. Leona, on the other hand, scrolls through Magicam— you’d thought he didn’t even have an account, the way he seemed— but you realised something about him from the way Jack and Ruggie talked about him. *He’s very important to them, and he’s also a professional idgafer.* “Alright. Let’s get to work.” Leona commands, and you sit up just a little bit straighter as they start.

"Don't mind Leona. He's always like that. He'll warm up eventually. Or not." Ruggie whispers conspiratorially as you chuckle. But you stay— they piqued your curiosity, and there's a passion in their eyes you know your friends would joke about, but in that small corner of the basement, there was nothing but them, you, and the instruments between everyone's hands. You watch how Jack's voice breaks in all the right places, how Ruggie improvises just enough to keep it interesting, how Leona plays like he's got a grudge against the world and the only language he speaks is percussion. Something about the rawness gets under your skin.

In a good way. And now, it's time for another method of creative chaos— the one that makes you want to shrivel up and perish.

You start by organising everything. That one shitty, rundown but colour-sorted notebook, along with your calendar app, becomes your lifeline. You organise album themes, lyrics analyses, jot down dates for when major and minor studios around the city were offering artists to join labels. A pirated version (your lovely, dearest pirated version) of Abebe becomes your most intimate consort, and gig flyers with 30 word descriptions about three of the most creative people you've ever met sear themselves behind your eyeballs.

But slowly, somehow, the dynamic changes within the group, and you're not sure what you've done in the time that it's taken. Leona brings you coffee once, though he grumbles about your "fuckin' complicated order" the whole time, even though the order was absolutely perfect, down to the way you liked your cream. Jack starts texting you songs he thinks you'd like. Ruggie calls you "boss" half-ironically, half-affectionately.

You find yourself staying there, camping on one of the bargain couches Ruggie'd secured for your overnight stays, listening to the music they'd been working on.

Now, it was time for the most difficult and soul-consuming part— the groveling. Not that you hadn't already been doing it, though. Taking some money from Ruggie that he definitely took from Leona's thick wallet when the man wasn't looking (not that he ever was) to bribe club owners and franchise managers into letting them play, or at least, their songs. Good grammar and a little charm (read: being pathetic) gets you somewhere, though you begin seeing Ruggie around more often.

Jack tells you that he was the unofficial manager and promoter before you took over the role. Ruggie still helps where he can but between his part-time jobs, taking care of his grandmother, and last-minute rehearsals, it's clear he's been burning the candle at all ends.

You pick up the slack without asking, but it soon becomes pretty obvious that there's a lot to be done, and maybe some night shifts had to be done.

It was during those night shifts that you saw Leona the most— apparently, he lived on the ground floor, just above the basement, and came downstairs to repair or replace equipment, write lyrics, or smoke on the staircase when he was feeling "particularly depressed girliepop era", as Ruggie called it. Didn't really make any sense (also because that entire conversation was a fever trip) until Jack explained that Leona liked to muse about the album themes you'd suggested while working on lyrics (he did 70% of the writing, Jack insisted, chest puffing with pride) and when he did, he got moody. Moody just meant he'd sit somewhere, smoke half a cigarette at most, get distracted by something, and never get back to musing in his "depression girliepop era style".

"Take a look at this." Leona murmurs one night, sitting opposite you at the raggedy coffee table. You look up from your colour-coded notebook, taking his black, leather-bound one and skimming through his lyrics of the night. So far, you noted, he hadn't touched the cigarette pack you'd taken from him about an hour ago. He props his chin on his palm, waiting for your feedback. "What do you think?"

"It looks good. Fits the vibe of the album really nicely— and it's pretty easy to memorise, I'll give you that. Did you take Jack's complaint the other week to heart?"

"Hmph." he mutters, snatching his notebook back. "He wasn't wrong."

"I think whoever listens to this... they'd connect even better, Leona." you don't miss the way that his Adam's apple bobs up and down before he stands up and walks away. "Good night." you murmur.

You hear a gentle baritone voice whisper goodnight back to you.

That only pushes you harder outside— negotiating performance timings, equipment procurement, practice sessions scheduled around Jack's evening classes and Ruggie's jobs and visiting his grandma— all while you quietly email and text people in the night. A friend here, a friend of a friend there, an ex-mutual who suddenly moved accounts and became a podcaster, college friends who worked at magazines.

Anyone who would listen to you got harped at about Noxus.

Then, you tweak their bio, set up accounts. Promote other people's music, create honest, funny videos about the lives they lead right now. You design a logo, a potential album cover, and send a sample track to a radio jockey friend who promised to play it between the advertisements, and a few friends who ran an indie magazine about music. All this behind Leona's back— not because you're making this a surprise for him or something, but because you know he loathes it.

To him, this band, his friends, and the music he makes aren't products to be promoted. But you know better than that— that sentiment doesn't put food on the table, and if there's no big break, the band would run themselves into the ground, no matter how much money Leona was investing in everything.

But you believe in this, in them. More than you've believed in yourself lately.

And one night, as you're adjusting the mics, going through your pre-show checklist, Leona corners you. "How long have you been sending our stuff around?" he asks as you freeze.

"Not long," you stutter, turning to face him. He's gone and done a slightly different look, you note, kohl underlining his eyes, with yellow, glittery eyeshadow on his eyelids. Likely also wearing some lipstick, or lipliner, or lip tint, though you try not to stare at his lips too much. "Just sent it out to some friends here and there, only people I really trust. I wanted to wait until I had something solid before—"

"Thank you." he murmurs, eyes fond and gentle. "You didn't have to go that far. Stay back and head with us to Jack's place. I got good news to share." His eyes linger a little too long, and you gulp, not saying anything. "You'll stay?"

"As long as you need me."

"Yeah." he murmurs, eyes crinkling.

Later, after the show, Leona, Jack, and Ruggie corner you while you negotiate payments with the owner, dragging you away as soon as you are done to Leona's car. "Play whatever you like. Except our music, since I know you're corny enough to do that."

You smirk, but press play on another pop band's music anyways, and the ride back to Jack's place is chilly but cozy, with a comfortable silence that coats all four of you like a warm blanket.

"What's the news, 'ona?" Ruggie gurgles, clearly exhausted as he doesn't even remove his shoes before flopping onto the couch. Jack, on the other hand, slips into his house slippers, running to the kitchen to get everyone something to eat and drink. "Anything for you, Yuu?" he asks quietly as you shake your head.

"The grand news is... we got into the competition. We currently have two sponsors— wait before you start fuckin' cheering, I'm not done— and we'll need more over the entire period of the competition, but knowin' us, I'm sure we'll be able to pull through. After all," Leona pauses, raising his glass of lemon soda like he was toasting clumsily, "We've got us, and so far, we've been fuckin' enough. And now, movin' onto the grander news—" Leona pauses again, levelling a look at you that you couldn't quite understand, "How would you like to be with us full-time, Yuu? We can work out a salary for you or— I don't know, however you feel like it."

Yuu pauses for a minute, their shock reflecting in the way that Jack, Ruggie and Leona look at them with expectation. "You guys really know how to lay it on thick, huh?" They start as Ruggie sighs dramatically and sinks harder into the couch pillows. "Glad to be working with you."

"What's the order, Boss?" Jack asks seriously as Leona chuckles.

"Couch time for a bit, some takeout to celebrate... and then back to work."

Photography : Rook Hunt / Styling : Divus Crewel
Hair & Makeup : Vil Schoenheit / Editor : Cater Diamond
Model : Leona Kingscholar

Sunset Savanna Second Prince's newest wardrobe.

STYLE : 01

JUMPSUIT

Effortlessly rugged

Utility meets charm in this tucked at the waist — jumpsuit look. The tanktop highlights the Prince's strength and ease. It's workwear with princely confidence.

STYLE : 02

LOOSE FIT

Off-duty cool

A slouchy button-up paired with wide-leg cream trousers and untied sneakers screams casual charisma. Accessories like the cap and a keychain adds flair to this street-ready ensemble.

STYLE : 03

OVERCOAT

Dramatic elegance

Layered in deep navy tones, this flowing overcoat and vest combo channels timeless sophistication. A crisp shirt and beret complete the look — a powerful mix of nobility and noir.

STYLE : 04

HOMEWEAR

Relaxed royalty

Loungewear never looked so good. A cropped tee, oversized cardigan, and soft, baggy pants offer comfort without compromising style. Perfect for lazy days.

WHEN WE RAN WILD

QuillAffinity

Vil was happy with his life.

Maybe not satisfied, but happy. His new miniseries was performing well with both classical and avant-garde audiences. What had his father called it? A ‘test run’ for how well he could hold an entire production up on his own, as his costars were all fresh-faced newbies. But, surprisingly, despite their limited experience and his villainous role within the series, Vil had found himself genuinely enjoying the experience. It had been challenging, like training a new muscle. But the result was nothing short of exemplary.

Sadly, it seemed that doting father of his picked up on this and sent Vil a care package so obnoxious, he had half a mind to assume Rook had done it. But no. The various goods inside were of sentimental value rather than obsessively selected. New lipsticks from the first brand that collaborated with him, small figurines from a toy company he promoted as a child, and…

Vil paused. Studying the little envelope placed sneakily next to a limited edition yoga mat and a bottle of his favorite vitamins. On it, his father’s terribly messy but somehow elegant script was a simple message.

“Remember these days?”

Curious, the Housewarden lifted a dagger-like letter opener from their desk and made quick work of the thick parcel. He looked inside with careful consideration of his new manicure, eyes widening and perfectly plucked eyebrows raising at the contents inside. What? Where? Where in all of Twisted Wonderland did his father find these?

Early mornings inside the Savannahclaw dorm were always chilly. That’s why Leona had a strict no-disturbances policy for every dorm member. Unless someone was dying or something important caught on fire, no one was to make so much as a peep until the sun fully showed its face. And while Jack respected Leona, even after everything that had occurred during his Overblot, the freshman was an early riser at heart.

Every morning under a lavender dawn, Jack woke up, brushed his teeth, put on his working gear, and warmed his body up for his morning jogs. Occasionally, he'd find Ruggie, half-asleep and eating a bowl of cereal in the lounge, but most days, Jack would be the only soul roaming about.

Which was just fine with him.

The wolf beastman had a couple of routes he'd take all around Night Raven College. Some took him as far as the Colosseum, and others were more incline-focused and took him around Ramshackle and back. In all honesty, Night Raven College actually provided a lot of great places to train, the problem lay in finding other guys willing to wake up early enough to really enjoy the opportunity. Sure, Savannahclaw had a bit of a delinquent reputation, but delinquency didn't exactly correlate to athleticism all the time. Thus, Jack could only sigh as he entered the Hall of Mirrors.

"How lovely to see your sense of punctuality improve, Jack." The freshman's ears perked up at the familiar, impetuous tone. Tail swishing and eager. Stepping out of Pomefiore's Dorm hall mirror in nothing less than top-of-the-line workout gear was the illustrious Housewarden slash award-winning actor, himself, Vil Schoenheit.

His childhood friend.

This early in the morning, Vil never bothered to put on anything heavier than sunscreen on his smooth, pale face. But even at their most made-up, Jack's childhood friend would never be so unrecognizable to him. Jack had known Vil for many years. And, even then, the wolf understood he was destined for a place like Night Raven College. Someone who worked that hard, someone who pushed themselves past their own limits like that, someone that determined didn't just belong here.

They earned their spot here.

"Well, I can't have you chucking snowballs at my window anymore, now can I?" Vil shot him a harmlessly sharp look his way. The same sort of look that they used to give him whenever Jack accidentally slept in during their childhood and was running late to the bus. The freshman could only huff at his upperclassman's expression, barely suppressing an eyeroll.

"Ready to go?"

"Naturally."

The early morning air of Sage's Island was full of the incoming frost of winter. Time worked a little differently outside the dorm halls, and so only the barest layer of azure-lavender rouge dusted the sky, despite how soon sunrise was when Jack left the Savannahclaw Dorm. And, as the two childhood friends took up a steady pace next to one another, even their cloudy puffs of breath seemed to fall into a sort of rhythm. In, out, in, out.

But something was off.

Some light in Vil's eyes that flashed in a way that Jack wasn't used to seeing. Nothing tragic or overtly joyous. No. This was a quiet light. Contemplative, which was a bit unlike his friend. Because if Vil wanted to do something, they did it. He'd been like that since Jack met him.

They couldn't have been more than seven or eight when the two of them met near the playground after elementary school. Jack was waiting for his parents to pick him up from sports practice when he noticed someone sitting on the swingset. Their blonde curls tumbling around a delicately bent head as they focused intently on a file full of papers in their lap. A script for a soon-to-be award-winning drama, he later found out. Vil had just gotten it and had stayed late that day to complete both his class work and get a headstart on memorizing his script. Even then, Vil was focus incarnate.

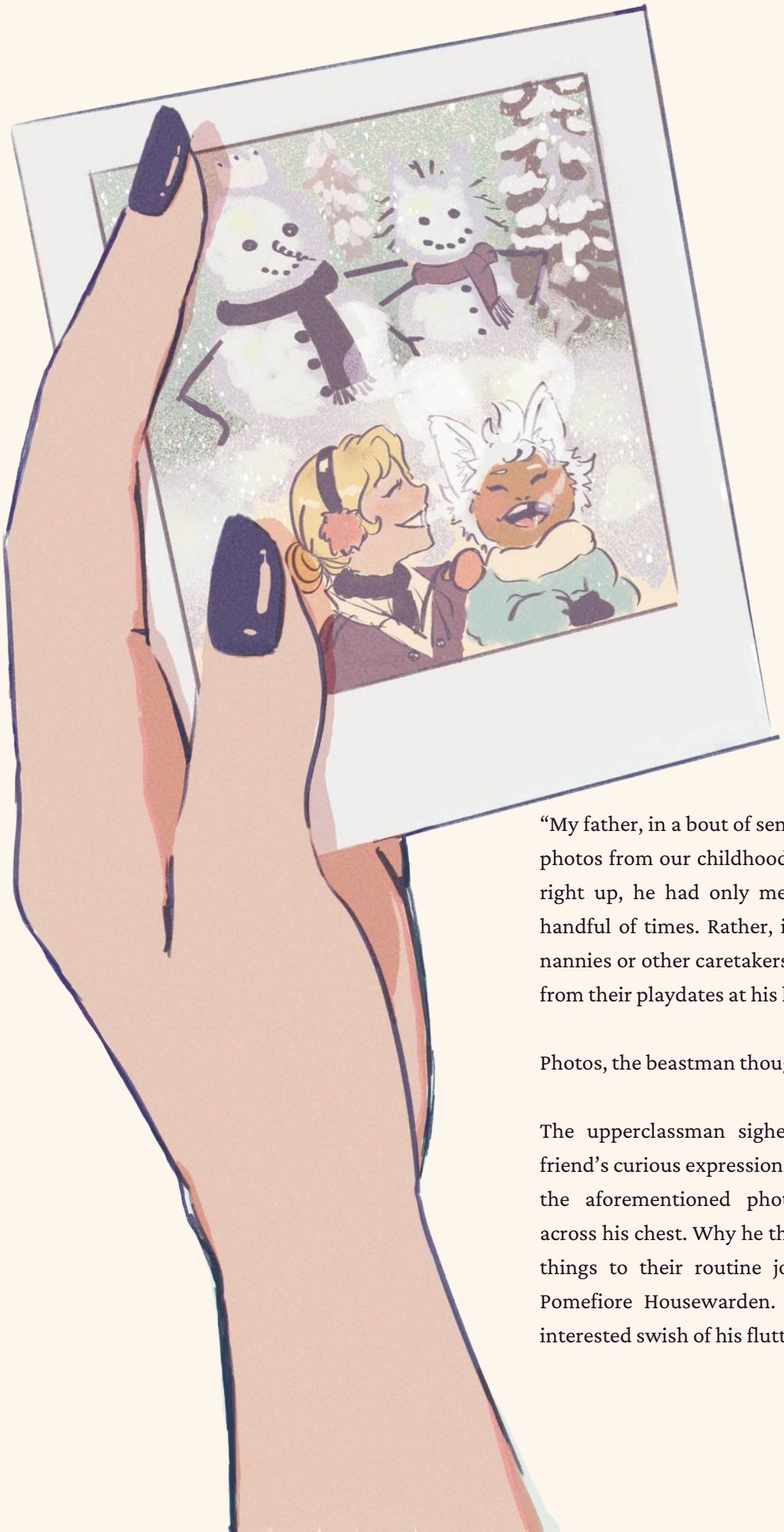
And Jack thought he was the coolest person ever.

Still did.

The pair of them took their halfway break near Sam's Shop, at which point Jack could bear it no more. His voice called out to Vil amongst the early calls of morning birds and the cool winds of winter to come.

"Something's on your mind." It wasn't a question, nor an unsure strike to the heart of the matter. The Pomefiore Housewarden let out a fond half-laugh in between sips of water. Fearlessly charging into the den of Housewarden's turmoil like that, the actor was torn between impressed and concerned for his friend.

Vil was far too used to dealing with compliments he didn't believe and insults disguised as compliments, that he was only all too willing to take as proper criticism. So Jack's direct honesty was a breath of fresh air. The wolf beastman never put on airs, never pandered for ego's sake, never said anything he didn't honestly feel.



“My father, in a bout of sentimentality, sent me some photos from our childhood.” That perked Jack’s ears right up, he had only met Eric Venue less than a handful of times. Rather, it was usually one of Vil’s nannies or other caretakers who often picked him up from their playdates at his house.

Photos, the beastman thought, which photos?

The upperclassman sighed good-naturedly at his friend’s curious expression. Vil took a moment to pull the aforementioned photos from the saddlebag across his chest. Why he thought to bring those little things to their routine jog was beyond even the Pomefiore Housewarden. Jack took them with an interested swish of his fluttering tail.

It was a bundle of old polaroids, snapshots of their childhood together. The time their school took them on a trip to the local botanical gardens, and Vil had to hold him back from driving face-first towards their cacti field. Another of the snowmen they made during Vil's first Yule with his family. Mr. Venue had been gone filming for some holiday rom-com, and neither Jack nor his parents could bear to let the older child celebrate winter alone. Naturally, he had made a snowbeastman, and Vil had opted for a snowqueen. Complete with fleece cape and snow crown.

Now that Jack thought of it, maybe most of these came from his mother? He couldn't remember whether or not Vil's father or other caregivers had been present for all these little snapshots from nearly every season they spent together. But...wait...this one was a bit different...

"From that time you bet me that I couldn't run from the park back to my house before you..." Jack murmured, looking at their flushed younger selves grinning up at the camera. Vil hmpfed indignantly next to him, peering over his shoulder.

Back then, Jack was short and stout with the roundest, softest baby face to match. But despite all his childishness then and now, Jack would always hold a dear place within the Housewarden's heart as one of the most genuine relations he's ever had. When Vil was younger, he didn't need toys or fame or even a break from his rigorous schedule. No. No, all Vil had wanted back then was someone who saw and reconized his efforts sincerely. And Jack did just that.

He always had.

"Ah yes, and if I remember correctly, after I beat you, you had to help me read my lines for a week." The curl of Vil's lips only betrayed a bit of fond cruelty. Jack gave a somewhat sour look in response, remembering how Vil had dressed him up in a glittering feather boa and makeup to better 'get him into character.' Pure, animal impulse fueled the beastman's next words.

"Ha! I'd like to see you beat me now."

Vil glanced at his friend, who was already well on his way to regretting the challenge. And, ordinarily, Vil would be compelled to say no. Citing all sorts of reasons as to why not. They weren't children. His personal trainer already outlined what sort of exercise he could and couldn't do for the next six weeks. The fact that he, Vil Schoenheit, was not one to put himself back into the past.

And yet...

“After an underclassman so boldly challenges me, what kind of Housewarden would I be if I refused to answer?” Jack looked at his childhood friend, surprised. Vil usually wasn’t one to fall for provocation, they were too level-headed for that. But the longer the beastman looked, the more he noticed how much lighter Vil seemed to be. It was a…nice look on someone so usually focused on the future.

Not that Jack was any better.

Leona would tell him how idiotic it was to idolize him, how nothing good would come from following his example. And, yeah, Jack disagreed with his Housewarden’s underhanded tendencies, but that didn’t mean he didn’t acknowledge all the real, genuine effort behind them. A similar sentiment existed in Jack’s heart towards Vil. He didn’t understand the allure of fame or beauty, but he did understand that his childhood friend worked himself to the bone for both. And just that effort alone deserved to be seen, to be heard.

“So what will you have to do when you lose, Housewarden Schoenheit?” The lights from within Sam’s Shop began flickering on despite no one having entered. Jack made slow, careful movements to ready himself near the closest lamp post. Vil’s amethyst eyes cut a sharp line towards him. His lips curling back to expose a hint of gleaming white teeth.

“When *you* lose, you mean.” Came the Housewarden’s pointed reply as he considered the options. Everything that would put him in the immediate vicinity of Leona was instantly off the table.

But…maybe…

“Epel told me the pair of you barely passed your last Potionology test, so if you win, and you won’t, I’ll tutor the both of you as a good upperclassman should.” Now, did Pomefiore’s favorite little freshman volunteer that information willingly?

No. But the fact of the matter was that no one was better at the subject than Vil, and he’d be damned if somthing as trivial as a failed potion muzzle all of Jack’s potential. As for Epel…Vil never said claimed such instruction would be gentle, after all.

The beastman’s eyes lit up with interest. The oncoming sun and its light warming their twany yellow color into something richer. And, just like when they were kids, Jack’s wagging tail always betrayed his genuine, excited feelings. The Housewarden quirked a delicately arched eyebrow his friend’s way, taking up a similar position next to the lamp post. Ready.

Waiting.

“Then…I guess, in the impossible situation that you win, I’ll…I’ll carry all the Film Club’s equipment during your next shoot.” Vil looked at Jack. Jack looked at Vil. Slowly, their gazes traveled back to the Hall of Mirrors, looming dark but not unwelcoming in the distance.

One.

Two.

Three.

And they were off. Flying on land. Feet thumping across gravel, stone, and grass. The wind sang fierce and high in Jack’s ears, and he wouldn’t have had it any other way. He tried, truly, to remember his track etiquette, and yet the snarling, happy smile bloomed on his face regardless. It felt good to run. Always had. But it felt better to run with someone who would never stop believing in him.

Vil’s heart pounded as he too tried his best to fight a crooked, laughing smile off his porcelain face. But, in the end, some kind of mad laugh bubbled up from within their chest. The air was cold and cutting against his hair, his cheeks, but, like a drop of poison or prick of a thorn, it was such an enlivening feeling. He pumped his long legs fast, faster. How nice this morning was. How nice those memories are. How wonderful their future seemed to be.

SLO-MO VIDEO ARTIST NETTLES PORTRAIT PANO

2025
Nillav

PERFECT LITTLE ANGELS

It-Happened-One-Fic

Leona outright glowered at the Prefect from his bed while they grinned at him like a sleep-deprived fiend from where they stood. Hands on their hips and at a safe distance from his bed, despite the fact they honestly looked like they'd reached a point where very little beyond success mattered to them.

Letting them stay here, in Savanaclaw, had most definitely been a mistake. He would've been better off just sending them away like he'd initially planned on doing and having to put up with both Jack and Ruggie nagging him.

After all, it really wasn't his problem that the Herbivore had been ousted from the house by the cephalopunk. They were the idiot who'd decided to essentially make a deal with the devil so they could deal with the aftermath of their own stupid decisions.

He didn't care if they'd done it for their friends or the demented talking cat who made up the other half of their student status. It was their problem, and he shouldn't have to be involved. Even if it was funny to watch them try and figure out what was going on with the trio of Octavinelle goons.

But none of that amusement from watching them scurry about while he parsed them along with tiny nuggets of information was worth any level of the sleep deprivation they were currently causing him.

It hadn't been so bad when they'd just kept to themselves, but they'd gone and gotten bold.

It was true, of course, that their best shot at beating the cephalopunk at his own game was to get Leona on their side, but Leona hardly cared to be used by anyone. Much less the Herbivore themselves.

Especially since he'd already lost to the Herbivore, of all people, once.

Because while he could claim that the overblot situation was the only reason they'd won and simultaneously put a hard stop on his scheme to ensure Savanaclaw won the Spelldrive tournament against that blasted lizard and his rabid Draconian fans, Leona knew perfectly well that he'd been soundly beaten by the magicless Prefect.

But none of that changed the current situation.

“Quit. It.” His words were growled as he stared down the Herbivore. Almost impressed that they didn’t flinch away at his irritation.

When he'd first met them, they’d fled with their tail between their legs, but evidently enough that had changed. And he wasn’t sure the change was for the better.

But then they’d already dealt with two overblots now. One of which had been his.

In a bizarre way, he was almost amused that they’d grown a spine, but now he was wondering if he’d underestimated them. Again.

As if to prove his suspicions, they tilted their head. Their eyes staying locked with his as they continued to grin all-too-smugly at him. As if their victory were assured as they spoke with an idle gesture to their cat, “Let's take it from the top, Grim!”

Grim, spiteful little furball that he was, cackled with malicious glee as Leona felt himself tense. Already knowing what was coming right before the racket began anew.

“A-weema-weh, a-weema-weh, a-weema-weh, a-weema-weh,” The blasted cat was out of tune, and the lyrics made no sense, but this was the umpteenth time he’d started the same accursed song that the Ramshackle duo had been yowling at him the entire night.

Yowling, which was notably accompanied by Grim beating on absolutely anything he could find that would make a racket so that Leona was cringing in what amounted to physical pain at the perfect den of noise that the cat alone was making.

And the Prefect, for their part, smiled oh-so-sweetly as they started singing like they were some sort of demented pop star who was determined to put Vil to shame, “In the jungle, the mIgHty jungle, the lion sleeps toni—!”

They cut off with a shriek as Leona could all but feel his temper snap into pieces as he dove at them with a snarl.

The sheets fell in a wrinkled pile as he practically exploded out of them, and the Herbivore fled. Scrambling around the bed at impressive speeds as they shouted back at their feline companion, “Keep going, Grim!!”

More obedient than Leona had ever seen him, the flame-eared feline kept up his yowling that soon proved too much to take, and Leona switched targets.

He almost caught the four-legged monster, but Grim managed to wriggle under a cabinet right as the Herbivore started up their own caterwauling in what had to be the worst form of opera ever.

Leona's ears flattened, and he spun. A curse slipping from his lips as he darted after them again.

Had he been in a better mood, he might have been impressed at their evasive maneuvers that almost perfectly mirrored the motions of a panicked rabbit scrambling through underbrush as they dug their way across his bed and away from him.

And when he'd just about nabbed them, the cat started again. Making some sort of demented gurgling sound before zipping back into those piercing notes that almost had Leona clapping his hands over his stinging ears.

"FINE!" The Prefect and cat both froze in place, their eyes wide as they fell blessedly silent at his bellow as he seethed. His narrowed eyes darting between the two of his harassers while his tail flicked back and forth agitatedly. "I'll help you with your stupid scheme, so just keep your mouths shut and let me sleep!" The Herbivore had the good graces to flinch as he snapped out his surrender.

But Leona wasn't about to be fooled by the relieved smile that crept onto the Herbivore's face as they looked towards Grim, who was cackling like the villain he was. At least he wasn't pretending to be anything he wasn't.

Leona knew the Herbivore for what they truly were now, though.

A true villain that made the rest of this school's student body look like perfect little angels.

STOLEN BOOZE

Kouro

At the speakeasy under the diner, Leona drank a smooth whisky over rocks as she glanced around the dance hall as the fellow flappers danced to jazz being played by the live band. She looked at her glass as Ruggie came in with a crate of wines and beers that she stole from the local gang in the area.

“Shi shi shi~” She chuckled as the bartender took the crate and checked out the goods.

“How much do you want for it?” The bartender said gruffly as she thought of a price as she leaned on the bar counter, grabbing one of the beers, and opening it.

“How much do you have?” Ruggie snickered, taking a sip of the obtained alcohol as the bartender noticed the duo’s outfit. Leona wore a simple black dress with pearl necklace, long white gloves to show their wealth with black heels as Ruggie wore a more flashy one with no gloves. She had a headband with a feather on the side. The bartender went to the corner where he kept his sales and counted the money quickly and slammed a solid 600 on her side of the table.

“Good deal,” Ruggie snickered as she counted the bills and gave the bartender the booze. Leona glanced at her before sipping her whisky.

“Who did you steal it from?”she questioned, adjusting her gloves.

Ruggie glanced at her before snickering. “I won't tell.” She teased as she tapped the bartender's table. “Get me the same she’s having,” Ruggie snickered as she pointed to Leona, who was nursing a neat whisky. The portly bartender looked at Leona, who glanced at him. “Put it on my tab,” The lioness said gruffly as she took a sip of her drink. She looked at the dance floor, hearing the trumpet playing as the other flappers danced to the jazz playing.

Jack, a young man with the heart of gold and admiration for prickly plants, wore a 2 piece suit which had a white collar shirt with black slacks with a belt. He was playing the trumpet with the enthusiasm of an eager child showing their new talents to their parents. Leona grunted as she got up and her ears picked up footsteps at the speakeasy entrance. She tensed up as Ruggie noticed.

“Damn it,” Ruggie cursed under her breath as she reached for the pistol on the bar table, “They tracked me down.”

Leona glanced at her before asking, “Who tracked you down?”

Meanwhile at the speakeasy stairway, a group of older men in expensive 3 piece suits held their own pistols. “Boss, do we head straight in or we wait?” One of the goons with the ginger hair and stubble on their chin named Jack asked. “We play the waiting game, boy. This Ruggie lady has connections with a famous woman named Leona. She is the only daughter of the Kingscholar Law Firm.”

"The law firm? The one that put Jackie in the clink?”

“Yes.”

“Boss-“

“Let’s go boys. We are on a schedule,” The leader of the local mafia said as he entered the speakeasy and saw Ruggie already tense. The leader chuckled slowly, “You can’t run from me, hyena. I know who steals my booze and they don’t live to tell the tale,” the leader got his Glock and pointed it at Ruggie’s temples, but not close to touch.

“I already sold it,” Ruggie said as the leader rolled the crane of his gun, looking rather pissed off. Leona narrowed her eyes and slowly got up from her barstool, walking up to the mafia boss and his goons, who just walked in.

“Hands off her now,” Leona grumbled.

“Or else what?” The mafia boss snickered, “you’re going to call your big brother to help you?” The suited man said mockingly.

Leona narrows her eyes more, “Don’t bring Falena into this. He has nothing to do with this.”

“Aw, is the little lioness scared-“ the mafia boss mocked before Leona slapped him across the cheek.

“Don’t disrespect me.” She walked off before the mafia bosses' goons ran off. The mafia boss stared blankly at the direction Leona and Ruggie ran off to. He had never been slapped that hard from a woman before—not even his wife did that. “Boys-“ The mafia boss yelled out before quieting down, realizing his goons left as soon Leona slapped him. He smirked. “I’ll let you off the hook this time hyena, don’t do it again,” the mafia boss grumbled as he walked off, waving bye from behind.

Leona brought Ruggie to the quiet area of the bar, looking at them sternly while sitting in the velvet booth. “Explain why you stole the alcohol from the local mafia.”

BEER
kaoro

SECOND SUN

Sol

Leona Kingscholar has always been surrounded by love.

But love, to him, never looked like a crown. It never felt like warmth—it burned, quiet and cruel, like sun on sand. It came in the shape of shadows cast by his brother's back, in the echo of applause never meant for him. It tasted like bitterness, like swallowed pride and words that caught in his throat before they could bloom.

He was a child who watched the world clap for someone else. The second prince. The spare. He learned young that there's a kind of loneliness no one prepares you for: the kind where people smile at you, feed you, teach you, even care for you—yet all you can feel is what they don't say. That you will never be him.

And so he told himself he didn't need them. That he didn't care. That their affections were pity wrapped in gold.

But still, love stayed.

It lingered in Farena's easy laughter, even when Leona's silence turned sharp. It curled around the meals made with him in mind, the ones he never touched—not because he didn't want them, but because accepting them felt like admitting he was hungry for more than food. It settled in the way servants hesitated—not in fear, but worry. Real worry. The kind that carved lines in their faces when he disappeared for days.

And later, in Ruggie's tireless loyalty, in how the hyena never once flinched away from the mess of Leona's moods. In how he'd bring food without being asked. In how the dorm he ruled with a lazy hand still followed him, not because they had to, but because somehow—impossibly—they wanted to.

Love was there in the small things. In the way letters still came, even when he stopped answering. In the way Farena never gave up trying to include him, never stopped asking "Will you come home during the summer?" even when the answer was always no. In the way people gave him space—not because he asked, but because they learned his language of silence and spoke it back to him.

He didn't see it for a long time.

Didn't want to see it.

Because if love had always been there—if all those meals left untouched were acts of devotion, if all that worry was real care, if all those gentle questions were invitations he'd been too afraid to accept—then maybe the real problem wasn't the world.

Maybe it was him.

Maybe he'd been starving in a banquet hall, dying of thirst in the rain, because he'd convinced himself he wasn't allowed to eat, wasn't allowed to drink, wasn't allowed to be loved the way he was instead of the way he thought he should be.

The thought didn't just dig in deep—it shattered him. Broke him open like an egg, all the years of carefully constructed indifference spilling out. All those people who'd tried to love him, and he'd thrown it back in their faces because he was so certain it couldn't be real.

But even in his bitterness, in the days where he wore indifference like armor and sloth like a shield, love remained. Patient. Unmoving. Unbending. Waiting for him to stop running long enough to let it catch him.

And it wasn't grand. It wasn't declarations or parades or crowns. It was quieter than that, and somehow that made it more devastating.

It was someone sitting beside him when he didn't speak. It was someone handing him tea they knew he liked, without asking, without expecting thanks. It was Ruggie's sigh as he kicked Leona's chair, mumbling, "Get up, man. You're better than this"—and meaning it. Really meaning it.

It was the realization—slow, reluctant, terrifying—that love had always been there.

He just hadn't believed he deserved it.

And maybe he'd been wrong about that, too.

He sits in the sun-drenched courtyard, head tilted back, the lazy king without a crown. The grass is warm beneath his fingers, soft with spring, and the breeze carries the scent of clover and wild things. Around him: noise, chatter, the low hum of laughter he pretends to ignore.

Ruggie's kicking rocks at his foot, saying something snide and familiar. Jack's arms are crossed, posturing like always—too serious for someone his age, too noble for someone still learning how to carry that kind of weight. And somewhere to his left, the ramshackle prefect leans into the sun, their eyes on him like they know.

Like they've always known.

Leona's throat feels tight. His chest aches in a way that has nothing to do with physical pain and everything to do with the slow, terrifying realization that these people—these stubborn, impossible people—aren't going anywhere. That they've seen him at his worst and stayed. That they've seen him try to push them away and stayed anyway.

That maybe, this is what love actually looks like.

Not the love he'd imagined as a child—the kind that came with fanfare and recognition and crowns. But this love. Quiet love. Stubborn love. The kind that shows up with snacks and kicks your chair when you're being an ass and sits with you in the sun without needing you to be anything other than what you are.

He pretends this means nothing.

But his hands are shaking in the grass, and when Ruggie glances over with that sharp, knowing look, Leona has to turn away.

"You alright there, your highness?" The Prefect's voice is softer than usual, careful in the way they get when they think Leona might bolt.

Leona wants to scoff. Wants to roll his eyes and mutter something cutting. Wants to do what he's always done—build walls, push back, prove that he doesn't need this.

Instead, he finds himself nodding. Just barely.

"Yeah," he says, and his voice cracks on the word. "Yeah, I'm... I'm alright."

The prefect's hand finds his shoulder, warm and steady and real. Grim's arguing with Ruggie about something stupid, their voices a familiar backdrop. The sun beats down on all of them, patient and constant.

And for the first time in his life, Leona lets himself believe it.

That he's loved.

Not for what he could be or should be or might have been in another life. But for what he is, right now, in this moment. Flawed and bitter and still learning how to accept kindness without flinching. Still learning that love doesn't always look like applause.

Sometimes it looks like this: friends who refuse to leave, even when you give them every reason to go.

He closes his eyes and lets the sun warm his face, lets their voices wash over him like a tide he's finally stopped fighting.

He's loved.

The thought should terrify him. Instead, it feels like coming home.

FAE

THE SUN, THE MOON, AND THE STAR

Soru

Kota wasn't special.

He wasn't the only one in Savanaclaw who thought of himself like that. Though clearly a cut above the rest if he was able to join Night Raven College and Savanaclaw, between all of these people who were also "a cut above the rest", he was nothing special.

He wasn't the fastest, the strongest, the one who could lift the most weights. He wasn't smart, with his grades hovering a distance comfortably far from academic probation, and most days, he walked with his head low and eyes steered to the ground in the hopes that someone wouldn't accidentally cut in the face during a fight he managed to cross. Which, to be fair, happened more often than he liked.

He didn't mind being average here— after all, average still meant you were a cut above the rest, above the regular folk back home— nothing like the people you'd have to step on to get to the top. In a dorm such as his, he'd found a home in the way the sand crunched under his weight, in the way that everyone smelt like a mixture of sweat and the sun, in the way that everyone understood you even when you didn't want to say anything.

And lately, in this chaos, Kota had been thinking about Leona, Ruggie, and Jack.

Leona Kingscholar wasn't what Kota expected in a Housewarden, but to be fair, he wasn't what *anyone* expected. Two years older than him, a late joiner, Leona rarely abused or even *used* his power, preferring to lounge elsewhere in the heat like the beastman species he belonged to. He barely used his magic too, preferring to use the limited words he spoke to settle arguments, or worst-case scenario, his fists.

He was always snoring, Kota notes as he and his friends pass him by one day, quietly whispering about his laziness. Kota thought it was laziness— after all, why would you not use the power you'd been given? Why would you wait for someone to come take it from you?

But then, once in a while, there'd be a real fight, when some of the dorm members would get all up in each other's faces, and then, as tensions rose and people started either cheering on or avoiding the starters of the fight, Leona would step in.

He wouldn't snarl, he wouldn't growl— just glare at the offending students like they were worms under his boots, and weirdly, that hurt more than any bruise or bleeding cut, since he never looked at anyone like that. No one got in the way, either— not because they feared Leona, but because they trusted him to keep things running.

It was odd that he'd trust him so much, he'd hear from his friends from the other dorms. *He doesn't ever have a kind word to say*.

That's the thing, though, Kota wanted to bite back.

Leona *never* needed to say anything nice. Platitudes were not his style, standing his ground and having your back were. He never offered a short sentence of comfort, but he knew exactly what needed to be said. "You're strong enough to get up. So get up." "They're not better than you. They're just louder." "You lose when you stop fighting. Not before."

Most days, those words were the only things keeping the dorm running. *He never pitied anyone, and saw everyone's potential— that was maybe the greatest kindness he could offer.*

In a world where people brushed off Savanaclaw as the "dorm with the most brutes, the most violence", Leona Kingscholar saw untapped potential, and demanded everyone hold themselves accountable and rise to the occasion. While he likely had no hope for himself, Kota hoped that one day, he'd see how much Savanaclaw loved him.

No one said it out loud, of course— after all, Savanaclaw was not a dorm where people wore their hearts on their sleeves— but it was evident in the way that the seniors stood a little straighter, a little taller, when Leona entered the room, in the way that all the first-years trained hard enough to earn one grunt of acknowledgement.

Kota did it himself too, sometimes. The way his pulse quickened when Leona barked something across the field. The way he found himself clenching his fists and moving, not because he was told to—but because Leona asked. Leona didn't ask often. But when he did, you didn't question it, you just answered.

Kota wasn't sure if Leona even realized the kind of loyalty he commanded. Maybe he did, and he just didn't care. Or maybe he carried it all quietly, buried somewhere deep behind that practiced scowl and lazy drawl. Either way, it didn't change the fact: they'd follow him. Not because he was a prince. Not because he was perfect.

But because when you were at your worst—when your back hit the dirt and your heart pounded with the expectation of failure— Leona Kingscholar was the only person in the world who would look you in the eye and say: "You're not done yet."

And in that moment, you'd believe him.

Most people didn't see Ruggie Bucchi, the officially-unofficial right hand of Leona Kingscholar, until it was too late and their wallets (or something equally precious) were gone. Too late to notice that he was actually in charge of most things, too late to see that he was one of the only people holding the dorm up.

If Leona was the head of the dorm, Kota surmises, the Ruggie was the spine, the one to take all the heavy load.

Ruggie didn't command the room the same way Leona did— in fact, he was scrawny, slinking about in the shadows like he had something to hide. He always talked like he took no one— including himself— seriously, but Ruggie saw everything, always did.

He saw who was skipping meals and who was taking too much. Who was overtraining, who was homesick. He kept track of everyone and everything without ever making it look like work. Practice schedules? Snack distribution? Sandpit patrol when things got too heated? That was all Ruggie. And he did it all without wanting credit or appreciation, but Kota knew that maybe what he got from Leona was appreciation enough.

He moved between them all like smoke, slipping through cracks, making sure things kept running when they shouldn't have. He didn't do it because he cared, exactly—not in the soft way. But he did it because it needed to be done. Because someone had to. And if there was one thing Ruggie Bucchi didn't do, it was stand by and let everything fall apart.

Do it quietly or loudly, cleanly if possible, messily and dirtily if required. No holds barred, for every means should be used to get the best outcome. He rolled his eyes once when Kota tried to thank him, and *still* tossed him a water bottle after Leona ran them rugged after practice.

Kota also knew that Ruggie would never call himself the "spine of Savanaclaw", but everyone knew he was, including Leona. He was the one who made the dorm feel like a pack, not just a bunch of angry boys in uniforms, angry at themselves, the world, the people around them. The one who kept them from turning on each other when tempers ran high and futures ran thin. The one who knew when to step back and let Leona lead, and when to slip in quietly and fix what had been broken.

And Kota and Ruggie **both** knew— this dorm wouldn't last a week without him.

Jack Howl was younger than Kota.

A first year when Kota was more than used to the Savanaclaw grind, he'd started his days in this dorm disciplined and rigid, with a mindset most of his batchmates called "black-n-white". In this young man's world, you were either right or wrong, and a grey space, where most of them lived and learnt to live, didn't exist.

At first, everyone thought he'd wash out, run away with his tail tucked between his legs like some kind of loser. He'd idolised Leona to a point where his mind and the actual man collided like different people, and the heartbreak would drive him away at least, if not anything else. He was too serious, too unwilling to be underhanded, too righteous to throw a punch. He respected the "pack hierarchy" as another wolf beastman told Kota, a smirk on his face like that was something too out of this world to believe.

But he didn't break, despite everything.

He'd stayed, trained, built connections in his own honest way. He followed the rules and held others to them, even when it was more convenient to be underhanded, even when it made Leona mad. Kota had seen that fight. Jack stood tall, disagreeing with the Housewarden on principle as everyone else braced for impact.

But Leona hadn't punished him— in fact, he said nothing at all, offering a small grunt as he stalked away, hand in the air like a white flag. "Do whatever you like, pup." he said then, and Kota knew Leona saw it too—Jack Howl had a kind of strength that didn't come from muscles or magic. It came from knowing who you were, and never flinching, no matter who stood across you.

When Leona overblotted, fury and worry and hopelessness all reaching a point he could no longer withstand, Jack was the first to move, the first to fight. Back then, Kota was shocked at his calm demeanour— how could you not be worried, how could you not care?!—but now he knew: he kept calm because he cared, and knew that his worry would likely make things worse. And Kota remembered thinking, in the chaos that followed, that Jack wasn't the kind of person you tried to be like, like Leona was. He was the kind of person who reminded you who you were, and why you still had time to change, someone completely different, someone unique.

Compared to them, Kota wasn't special at all.

He wasn't someone powerful like the Housewarden, someone who could take everyone's burdens like Ruggie, or even someone who could challenge the status quo like Jack. But he was good at listening, at paying attention, and he saw three people who mattered.

He watched his Housewarden sleep through dorm meetings but still know exactly when someone needed to hear the truth and someone to push them. He watched a hyena beastman keep an entire dorm from falling apart with nothing but grit and a shitty to-do list. He watched a lone wolf grow into a leader by simply being good, and staying that way.

And maybe Kota wouldn't be remembered. Maybe he'd graduate, nameless, just another growl in the background of someone else's roar.

But he'd learned something during his time here: Lions don't roar alone, and if he couldn't be a king or a commander or a beacon of hope, then he'd be part of the chorus. He'd still belong, and that was enough.

GER
Jules Louizzolo

JUST A FLESH WOUND

Raven

Every time he looks in his reflection–in the mirror, on the surface of water, in the shine of metal–the slash across his left eye stares straight back at him. He finds it without fail, fingers grazing the flesh as tenderly as one might with a child Cheka's age. It doesn't bleed into the pool at which he kneels, doesn't *hurt*, yet he is drawn to it all the same.

The scar. That which brands him as the scorned second-born. Marked, for all to see.

The prince who will never be king.

He no longer recalls the specifics of how he had gotten it. The string of events was lost amidst the sour dregs of his childhood.

He reaches into the recesses of his mind. Sweeps away the musty air, clears the cobwebs that have collected. A faint memory forms, rising from clouds of dust.

There was a cub crouched low to the ground, hands clamped over the left side of his face. Red rivulets oozed from between his fingers. Searing pain came in a sudden wave, and an agonized howl tore free from him.

But no one came to his side.

The servants clustered around a boy 10 years his senior. Patting him down, inspecting him for the slightest speck of blood on his fine clothes or skin. They tutted and cooed sympathetically, a gaggle of simpering mother hens hovering over a single golden child.

Falena, he thought bitterly.

It was *always* Falena.

They tended to him only after they had made certain that their crown prince was unhurt. Pulled him from his brother and rushed them to separate places. Falena, to his studies. Him, to the infirmary.

Despite the tears in his eyes and stickiness upon his palms, he had tried to stay strong. He'd stuck out his chin defiantly and told a grand fib about how they had been chased by rogues and a snake had almost struck him. They had only narrowly escaped by diving into a patch of skeletal remains and cacti. The needles had raked their claws over them, and—

The usual sentiments rained down on him. Even the royal doctor had tutted and told him off.

"You're not in any position to be telling these tall tales. Not another word from you, young man."

"Leona-sama is so brash. He put both himself and Falena-sama in danger."

"You should be more careful. Think of what could have happened to your brother thanks to your reckless decisions!"

If he had been hurt back then, he didn't remember a lick of it anymore. There was only the bite of betrayal, the sound of his little heart breaking, and the fire of rage that followed.

Shut it. I don't want to hear you sycophants babble on for a moment longer...!

He was left in that cold, sterile cot to stew in his feelings, clutching a gauze pad over his injury. There was a window nearby, and sun spilling onto the sheets—but he felt as though the light didn't quite touch him. It, too, was afraid.

They all are.

He barely registered the footsteps padding up to his beside.

"So this is where you were," came a deep, ancient voice. He knew it to belonged to the Grand Chamberlain, the old man that frequently pestered him about decorum and played games of chess. "How are you feeling, Leona-sama?"

"Fine," he lied through his teeth, refusing to face him.

"Hmm." The noncommittal sound led into a gentle question. "May I inspect you? I suspect you haven't had the sense to change the dressing since lying down. I'll save you the trouble of doing it yourself. We wouldn't want the wound getting infected now."

A pause as he considered it.

Then a groan as the lion sat up in the cot. His injured side was still angled away, nursed in both hands. A part of him, hidden away.

From his one good eye, he could see that the chamberlain had set a basin of water on the bedside bureau. A small hand towel was folded neatly and set atop a first aid kit. The bespectacled man met his gaze and offered a small smile that creased the corners of his mouth.

His starched collar was set as high as ever, stiff as he was. A feathered tail peering out from under his azure robes and blindingly white trousers. Once, he had boasted colorful plumage–but now, time had leeched his hair of color, and white had started to streak them. The strings of beads and sunset feathers adorning his chest were still as bright as his spirit. And his eyes…

Kind, warm. Almost grandfatherly.

The young prince's resolve wavered.

"… Make it quick, Kifaji," he ordered pointedly, jerking his head.

"My, you still have the nerve to make such demands of me? Perhaps there was no need for me to be concerned for your wellbeing after all."

But the bird beastman bent anyway and peeled off the used gauze.. "… Oh dear. This is quite the… Well, let me see what I can do."

With a moist towel, he carefully sponged the site down, pausing when the boy winced. When the area was clean again, he applied fresh gauze with tweezers and instructed his prince to hold it in place. In another hour, they'd have to repeat the process.

"I know," he groused, trying to sound tough. "I'm not *stupid*."

"I am aware," Kifaji replied patiently. "It doesn't hurt to double check to ensure that you take proper care of yourself."

"What does it matter?" He flopped back onto the mattress. "It's gonna scar either way."

The older man startled. "You mustn't say that. Do not speak of yourself as though you are not worth anything."

“Why not?” he challenged. It hurt to utter those words–not in his muscles or marrow, but in the deepest part of himself, his soul. “Doesn’t matter what I do. It all leads to the same outcome whether I try hard or not. I’ve heard how all the servants speak about me. What’s the point of it all?”

Kifaji silently inspected him, the boy whose back was presented. He was facing the light, but it dared not embrace him. Melancholy struck him in the chest, sadness strumming him in a song. Kifahi laid a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“... The King of Beasts also had a scar where you do, Leona-sama. He earned it in a battle while protecting his kingdom and his loved ones from those who sought to pry it from his paws. Bloody and battered, bruised and beaten down... he fought, and eventually rose victorious.

“That scar is proof of your bravery, and his. That is who you are, Leona-sama. Someone who keeps fighting, even when it is difficult to.

“You must never relinquish this part of yourself. That perseverance is yours and yours alone. Be proud of that–of who you are. Do you understand?”

You must not relinquish it.

Never ever.

The recollection grinds against him like flint to a rock, conjuring sparks of annoyance. They’re hot and angry, and threaten to form a fire beneath his flesh.

His hand falls away from his face and balls into a fist at his side. The reflection–a shadow of himself–does the same. The scar is revealed once more.

A useless memory like that... Don’t think I even stayed awake for the rest of his speech. I just knocked out to avoid listening to him. So why...? Why did I have to go and remember that now?

“... Tch.”

Leona swipes a hand at the pool of water, disrupting his other self. He fragments into many shapes and colors, the scar losing itself in the noise. Before he can fully reassemble, he has already risen onto his feet and turned away.

Towards the sun, to the world beyond.

“That is who you are, Leona-sama. Someone who keeps fighting, even when it is difficult to.”

“... Hmph. Damn right, Kifaji.”

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SMILE ZONE
DELIVERY
HYENA
LIMITED EDIT

COMING UP NEXT

The Crown of Vengeance and Sorrow, a Savanaclaw Halloween Zine! With a new crew joining the members of the uprising, watch them create new mysteries for the TWST (particularly, Savanaclaw) boys to solve, new places and worlds to see, and old friends with a few teasing grudges ^-^

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ALSO SEE

The Prince's Uprising Volume 1, the 250+ page first volume in this series, where contributors created a total of 21 fanfics and 30+ artworks describing the three boys and their relationships with the world around them. The first ever look in this server, and it's chaos and love for this hotheaded, *tsundere* dorm.

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OTHER DORM ZINES

Hesperious Sands, a 100+ page zine focusing on the Scarabia dorm of TWST! Contributors created 23 fanfics and 24 wonderful pieces of art about the complicated relationship Jamil Viper and Kalim al-Asim have with each other and the world. **Renewed for a Volume 2!**

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The Valley of Dreams, a TWST zine revolving around Diasomnia! With 150 pages of art and fanfic and various kinds of digital merch, the zine explores the themes of friendship, family, and dreams all within and around canon. **Renewed for a Volume 2!**

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